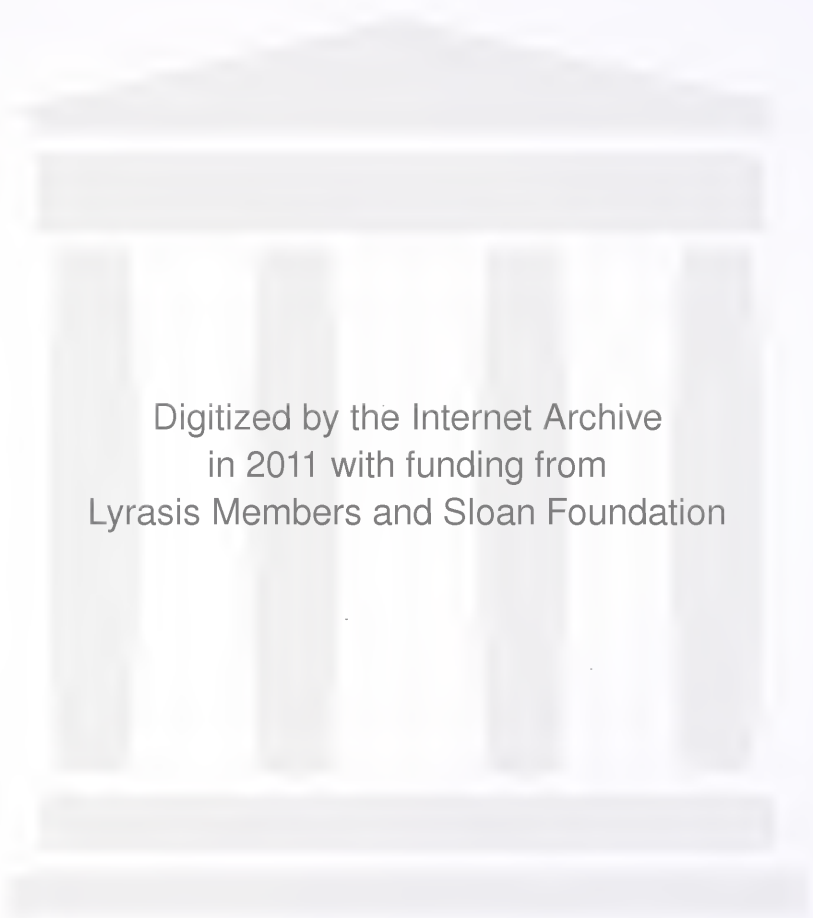
The background of the entire page is a large, abstract, black and white ink splatter or blotch. The ink is dark and irregular, with many fine, radiating lines and larger, more solid areas of black, creating a complex, organic pattern that resembles a large, dark stain or a splash of ink on a light surface. The overall effect is one of raw, expressive energy.

QUAD

2009



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QUAD

**Birmingham-Southern's Literature
and Arts Journal
Volume LXX**

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Lindsey O'Connor , *Untitled*, calligraphy and etching

EXCAVATION

by Laura Chaires

This morning I dug
through a pile of crumpled clothes in the corner
of my eight-by-ten room and chose
a faded pair of jeans,
shimmied into them and felt
a balled-up post-it note in the pocket that said
something about a napkin, a sick day, and an unborn child.
That's a poem to me—my life exists in little sentences
not even long enough for revision, and I see poetry
in the smile crinkles around your eyes as you laugh
at me smoothing out a wrinkled shirt that I decide
is definitely clean enough to wear.
I shove my feet into a pair of shoes that I've had
since ninth grade, and it reminds me of how
words fill up my fingers, straining at the joints until
my pen spits them out, strings of images and emotions that I wish
I could describe better, or that I wish would break into stanzas
instead of sentences, a poem instead of an essay,
but my socks never match, and I can never quite find
that one metaphor that holds it all together, so I
tighten my belt instead and grab a hat off the hook on the wall,
give you a kiss on the cheek, and rummage around in the closet until I find
my winter coat, putting it on as I rush out the door,
only to find that it, too, has poems in the pockets that fall out
as I scurry down the stairs, and I perch on the landing to write them down,
where you find me hours later and smile at my futility.
It's hard to get very far.

BE VIGILANT

by Clark Weber

Peter Ingle snuck his wife's sketchbook from the harmony walnut chest at the foot of their bed, though he knew he shouldn't. He enjoyed flipping through Judith's drawings because of the soothing, rural subjects she chose, the open prairies and pastoral barns, so that is why he gaped when he found the scarecrow. That thing was the worst part, he decided, but not for any lack of artistry. No, Judith was very talented, even if she got self-conscious whenever she caught Peter leafing through her work. The scarecrow dominated the foreground, hung on two crossed sticks and held together by a torn corduroy coat, its arms stretched wide as if signaling the viewer to stop, and no hands except for loose straw spilling from the sleeves. The thing had no hat, its tie flapped in the wind — *Why was it wearing a tie?* —, and its sack face was painted with a smile. Behind the scarecrow, a field of dead, withered corn plants stretched to the horizon. The sky was dark and gray and raining soot. Unnerved, Peter put the book back into the chest.

As he dressed that morning, Peter

twisted his profile in the closet's full-length mirror to see if the tiny bald spot on the back of his head had gotten any larger. He flexed his concave chest, and then gave up trying to impress himself and put on his horn-rimmed glasses. The United States Government was in many ways a conservative employer, so Peter opted for a white button-down over black pants and a pair of penny-loafers. He liked for his neckwear to be loud, and he chose a tie print of Piet Mondrian's *Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow* and made the knot just like his father had taught him twenty years before. The occasion had been his first date, which he had almost been late for since his father, standing over his shoulder, had made him start all over each time he messed up. But as he inspected the knot, his mind went back to his wife's drawing of the scarecrow, and he wondered what in the world could have inspired her to draw such a thing.

Downstairs and just outside the kitchen, Judith served salmon and eggs on porcelain-white plates embellished with blue concentric circles. They ate at



Shelley Tucker, *Nightmare*, ebony pencil, crayon, and acrylic

a neat, black-lacquered breakfast table with a chipped leg that Judith had bought at Macy's for a steal. As his wife read the Lifestyles section of the paper, Peter looked her over and admired the line of her chin, her green eyes, and her brunette hair rolled up into a bun. She was still in a nightgown. For a moment, Peter thought she was too quiet. But she was usually quiet in the mornings, and so was Peter for that matter. Still, he was going to ask her about the drawing. But as soon as he made up his mind to, he was struck by the idea that his whole preoccupation with the scarecrow was foolish, childish, and not a subject worthy of being broached. At least, not for adults: Peter was thirty-two, and Judith was two years younger than him.

With this resolution, Peter wolfed his salmon, kissed his wife goodbye, and backed his BMW Coupe out of the garage.

Five years ago, the Ingles had moved to the Wooded Alcove subdivision in Elwood, where the houses were larger and the trees more common than in Lemont, a southwest suburb of Chicago. This meant that Peter had to commute about thirty miles to Argonne National Laboratory where he was an assistant physicist, but Judith felt safer in Elwood so Peter didn't mind. Abiding community guidelines, all houses had manicured lawns and garage doors painted gray headed north past the harvested corn fields and miles of flat, indifferent land.

The days were short in November, so when Peter got back home it was dark, save for the orange twilight that lingered under the clouds and filtered through bare branches of the mulberries, beeches, and hickories that cushioned the neighborhood. Peter trudged through the living room and up the white-carpeted stairs with the oak balustrade without taking off his sport-coat. Judith was lying on their double-bed reading a book when he came in, and standing in the doorway, Peter asked her about the scarecrow in her sketchbook.

“Does this mean I need to find a new hiding place?” Judith sighed. “If you have to know, I had a dream.”

“Oh. It’s just so different.” Peter shifted his feet and slid off his pennies. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“What – are you my psychiatrist now?” Judith smiled as she said this, but then she saw that Peter was interested and perhaps a little nervous. She shut her book using an old receipt to mark the page. “Fine, fine, here goes. I was sitting on the front porch steps of my parents’ house in Paducah, but it was here in Illinois instead of Kentucky, and Jennie Hudson, she was right next to me. She was a pretty little girl, her hair done up in pigtails, and even though I had grown up in the dream, she took my hand and led me around the corn fields like it didn’t matter. She was my best friend in sixth grade, until her family moved out west, and I never saw her again. I remember trying to write a letter, but I couldn’t find her new address and none of my classmates knew either, and I end-

***“The scarecrow was
staring at me so I turned
my back and huddled
down on the grass”***

ed up throwing the paper into the trash and crying. She led me to the scarecrow. I thought it was Dad at first, and then Jennie was gone. I was alone. The scarecrow was staring at me so I turned my back and huddled down on the grass. Even though I was an adult I felt like a child again, like when I got lost on the field trip to Wurth Farms and hid behind the old-fashioned wagon until Mrs. Perkins found me at sunset. And after that Dad wouldn’t let me go anywhere by myself. It was touching and frustrating at the same time. Anyway, I looked up in my dream. The sky had gone black and gray, and ash like snow was falling so I stuck out my tongue, and the stuff tasted sweet before it burned. Then I woke up. I don’t know what it means. Is it supposed to mean something?”

Peter had undone his tie. He pushed up his glasses and scratched the bridge of his nose. “I couldn’t say. I don’t remember my dreams.” He sometimes wondered if he dreamed at all, but he knew he did. He forgot them as soon as he awoke, and this was for the best.

Dreams were a bunch of bunk, as far as he was concerned. He got into bed next to Judith, put an arm around her, and rubbed her shoulder.

"Peter, do you think the Labs are safe?"

He gave her a quizzical look. "Of course they're safe. We've never had an accident."

"That's what they say. I mean... I just wonder what goes on. I don't even know what you do. I have all the time in a day to worry that you could fall into a vat or something."

"We don't have any vats," Peter said, though there probably were a few here or there on the fifteen-hundred acre compound. But that was beside the point. "Dear, I wish I could tell you everything that happens. You'd laugh because it's so boring. It's just a normal day-job with some guards and security, and if anything, that should make you worry less."

Judith sat up with sudden inspiration. "That's just it. The patrols, the guards with guns, they're what make me worry. Like there's something that shouldn't be there." Peter had taken Judith to a luncheon fundraiser at Argonne a few years back, and once they had gotten through the double layer of barbed wire at the security gate, she at first thought the place was quaint, like a college campus that had been frozen in time during the 1950s. But as they drove over the cracked boulevards, Judith kept expecting to see people that never appeared. Sidewalks, windows, and parking lots were vacant. The silence was

oppressive. At intersections, they drove under pipes leaking white steam, and before they reached the cafeteria, they passed cooling towers, mysterious white domes with rust on the sides, and an old industrial steel-sided building where the windows were all blacked out, except for one. She had tried to look inside, despite the protests of the voice inside her. Judith had never overcome the creeps that Argonne had given her that day.

"I'll have to take you out there again sometime. Maybe the next post-doc conference. We'll have dinner, and you'll think better of the place." With that, Peter was done talking about Argonne for the night.

Friday evening, the Ingles entertained company. Judith had invited the Hayes, who lived a few houses up on Wooded Alcove Drive, over for dinner. Judith had met Margaret Hayes at church and had been teaching her how to paint. David Hayes worked as a lawyer, a partner with Habish and Reese. Peter did not go to church, so he had never met them.

The dining room had turned out nicely. Judith had disposed of the scientific journals stacked on the table and brought the wedding gifts out of

*"...Like there's
something that
shouldn't be there"*

the cabinet: tablecloth, gold-filigree napkins, and china plates printed with tulips, though the roast duck covered up the design. She decorated the table with a few candles but couldn't find any flowers for her mother's bell-shaped vase at this time of the year.

Not really," Peter said. "Last month I left my security pass on the countertop, and when I got to the gate and couldn't find it, the guards flashed their lights and parked SUVs in front and behind my car, as if I'd try to ram through their checkpoint. It was just a farce. I mean, Burt was on duty that day, and he knows me. We played poker once. So they took me to the side and gave me a lecture, made me wait fifteen minutes until they could print off a new plastic badge and sent me on my way. Everyone at Argonne has been through the rigmarole at least once. When the college kids come for the symposiums, they like to mess with them, ask them for their great-grandmother's maiden name and so on."

David leaned back in his chair. "Pah, I bet you've got better stories in that big head of yours."

Peter couldn't decide if David meant 'big head' literally or figuratively. He was about to give his speech on security protocol that the division managers made them recite every other month, when Judith exclaimed beside him, "My goodness, is she alright?"

"Mrs. Anderson's fine, but I don't know what would've happened if the gardener hadn't shown up." Margaret blinked when she realized the husbands were looking at her as well. "Well, I was

just telling Judith what Mrs. Anderson's cleaning lady, who does both our houses now, told me. A black man came to her door in broad daylight on Tuesday, and when she cracked the door, he tried to force his way inside. Thank goodness for the chain lock. He shook the door back and forth, and Mrs. Anderson held on for dear life and ended up with a bruised wrist. He might have snapped the chain if Ronnie hadn't come by at that moment. What a man! He chased that scumbag down the street waving a garden hoe and saw him peel off in a white van that was waiting for him. And all of this on Arrowhead Street—*Arrowhead Street*, do you believe it? What a lot we're all in."

"We all live in the hand of God," Judith agreed.

Peter felt a knot forming in his stomach. Arrowhead wasn't but a fifteen hundred feet on the other side of the mulberries and across some train tracks.

Peter woke in the middle of the night. He had been dreaming that Judith's God-awful scarecrow was trying to break through the bay window downstairs, and his mother was there — she made him put on a jacket before he walked out to fend it off. Peter, lucid, sat up in bed and wondered why he was not asleep. Then, he heard the sound: *Tat-tat, tat-tat-tat*. He got out of bed, threw on some wool pants and a shirt, and found his glasses on the bedside table. Judith was still asleep. There were no guns in the house. The best he could manage was

to grab a pair of scissors from their bureau. The sound came from a room at the end of the hall upstairs. When he arrived, he saw the storm window rattling in the wind.

Peter relaxed and hunched down on the carpet. The walls were painted white with no adornments, and an empty bed frame sat in one corner. This would be the baby's room, when the time came. He hoped it would be soon. They had been trying for some time, but Judith had yet to conceive. They had an appointment with the gynecologist next month. As with all problems in his life, Peter Ingle was working on a solution.

He couldn't go back to sleep yet. Peter clambered down to the first floor and stood over the heating vent in the kitchen, warming his hands. He sank his back into the living room's leather couch, angled to face the Samsung TV. One of Judith's paintings of a barn and meadow hung from the wall. To ease his mind, Peter decided to check the door locks and the windows one more time. He was at the bay window when he saw a white van, parked near the end of the cul-de-sac between the Moore's and Zielinski's houses. It was too dark outside to see a license plate or make out much more than the shape. Didn't the Moores own a Caravan? Peter couldn't remember if he had seen a white van in the neighborhood before or what cars had been parked on the street before dinner. Outside, the wind continued to buffet the mulberries. He couldn't see any other movement.

Judith, bleary-eyed, came down a

few hours later as dawn was starting to crest the horizon. Peter was huddled on the couch asleep with an umbrella, of all things, leaned against the couch just out of reach. She threw a blanket over him and went back to bed. When Peter woke in the morning, the van was gone.

Be Vigilant. The poster admonished passersby in every lobby and corridor at Argonne National Laboratory. At the top, it featured a close-up image of a soldier's face, eyes shielded by a pair of binoculars, lips stolid, and Kevlar helmet cinched tight. Underneath this gigantic American, a faceless man tried to scale a fence. Judith would have guffawed at the poster, and Peter agreed that it was a little overdone, but more and more he was beginning to empathize with the man with the binoculars. Both he and Peter had come to the conclusion that living in the hand of God was not satisfactory. A technician from ADT Security arrived Monday morning. Peter stayed home from work so he could watch the man install a new ultrasonic alarm system and deadbolts with captive keylocks on all the doors.

***...Living in the
hand of God
was not
satisfactory***



Lindsey Driscoll, *Undone*, photography

CONDITIONED

by Scott Shelton

A homemade explosion ignites an Iraqi sky
Witness to so much war
It weeps of boredom
On the freshly dead.

The discharge sends ex-human-beings clambering
Into the jaded-blue sky.
Indiscriminate pieces of blood and bone.
A momentary scramble toward some bright heaven
Only to cascade back, unsanctified,
Onto the seared asphalt of the car-bombed lot.

With unrelenting nonchalance,
Satellites beam this "newsflash" through
A cold space that awaits
The severe victims, or causalities,
Or collateral, or whatever they are.
The victims, the reality, never reach space.
Never reach me.

The explosion my T.V. generates,
Electrons igniting a blank, ready-made screen.
"Same old news"
I'm as inured as that Iraqi Sky.
Pavlov rings his piercing bell.

As I change the channel
The charred bodies dissolve
Leaving no identifying stain.
Ever-ready electrons dim then glow.
A smiling black-suited weatherman.
The prophetic profiteer with his fickle forecast
"Fifty-percent chance the sky will sob tomorrow."

W A L - M A R T

by Paul Sparkman

"We can't even give store credit without a receipt."

The manager speaks through middle-age glasses,
white dress shirt and a blue tie.

"Not even for some fucking cans of food?"

"Sorry. No."

Elena steps past cashiers into the lanes of Wal-Mart.

At the mouth of aisle eleven

She drops the yellow-ended match
onto the overturned buggy, its
spilled pile soaked in three cans of Zippo.

A six-foot ball of orange fire
rises, settles in four seconds,
illuminating the women's pants
over numb fluorescence.

Rhinestone studded sunglasses
melt faster than Barbie's face, and
Elena is still soaking dresses,
throwing them in.

And it burns for thirty seconds before
the ceiling cloud bursts.

Rain dashes the aisles as
half of the late afternoon Tuesday crowd
runs for the doors in the pouring, blaring alarm.
Others stand still, wrinkled forehead or
grin-bare teeth. Open eyes.

Christopher Weaver, laid-off crane operator,
and his two sons tip
ten- foot shelves like dominoes,

E
A

P
A
R
T
Y

crashing beige-shaded lamps, light fixtures,
pre-fabricated false wood grain
bookcases and desks.

Translucent neon plastic beads patter
from tampons to electronics.

One in a Homewood Football hoodie
wanders out the door with a couple of Xboxes
under his arms. Others run aisles,
butterflying cans of spray-paint empty.

Chase and Derrick toss tires as
far as they can over, into the shelves.

Blue-vested Jamal sweeps
cases of Great Value field peas, new potatoes and
jars of Miracle Whip off the shelves to shatter splat,
gallons of milk already muddling in the floor flood.

Four women pull gold, silver, diamonds
from jagged display cases to their pockets.

June grinds a sapphire bracelet into
wet tile with the heel of her boot.

Piled carts career through the door,
trailing socks, pant leg streamers.

Hundreds of Gerber babies cry vegetable-ink tears.

The vitamins all blend together, and
a half-ton stack of Quik-crete mixes itself hard.

Bedding and fabrics will mildew, rot by Friday.

Victor lights a Pall-Mall on the last flame—

stars and stripes, ignition thrown from the top of the pyre,
sheltered from the deluge by a rack of

singed black and red coats—and

watches Elena stride away into
sprinkler-mist alarm-strobe rainbows.

Her hips dip a straight rhythm out the staid-open doors,
skin shedding drops,

brown-pink nipples bouncing through a silver blouse.

Her eyes swallow sun and wind

like topaz mines,

land somewhere beyond

the four policemen and their heart-aching guns.



Jasmine Higbee, *Gyrus frontalis superior*, ink and photo transfer on paper



Jasmine Higbee, *Fasciculus gracilis*, ink, photo transfer, and gesso on paper

A WOMAN IN A **TANGERINE** MANET'S "A BAR AT THE

"You know the man's a pervert," the woman in
the tangerine-colored hat says. "Painting prostitutes like idols.
Painting things unfinished—why, that man in the corner has no face."
The stranger beside her shakes his head to fling
off her words. He brings his callused hands up to his chest
and rings them together, to help squeeze
out his thoughts. "You're wrong," he begins. "See the woman, bottled
like the bottle of Biere Blanch Basse. She's trapped.
See how her hands, raw, lacquer the bar, rough
with the dexterity of a surgeon? Skilled. See how she
marshmallows the edge, under the jelly-colored lights?
She's tired, Miss—waiting for her life
to change." He folds his arms and the woman steps forward.
"I see her, sir," she squeaks, fat hands on fat waist.
"I see her leaning forward, breasts a buffet. I see the limned
green shoes of the woman standing on the lacquered bars. I see

HAT EXAMINES FOLIES-BERGERE"

by Jessica Broom

sinner in Paris. Gentlemen and demimondes
laughing it up with Satan." His hooded eyes look over her and he steps
forward, his pointed shoe almost touching her rounded one. "The man has
no face because he is nothing more
than a dot of paint on a stretched canvas.
The gentlemen with the hat is as empty as the glass
just washed. The girl hangs from the pole, wishing the pole
would hang her. Or, maybe she swings from the pole
so she can fly. Maybe he comes to the bar
so he can dream. Maybe the men would rather be happy sinners
than fat saints." The woman gawks at him and ruffles her feathered
boa before brushing past, just barely missing
the stranger's toes.

CHINA IN PRETEXT

by Susan Fant

China surrounds me,
covers me like a scarlet red blanket,
stars shinning in between my shut
eyelids.

In this place, untouchable,
unfathomable,
I pretend to be a ghost –
sifting between pagoda corners,
drifting in and out of tea houses.

Anxiety lifts me from the permeable,
as I lie awake in bed,
making lists in and out of sleep,
memorizing embassy addresses –
soon to be forgotten, just as they are
required.

But, for now, China seeps into my
blood stream,
cools my veins,
lifts bumps on my forearms,
drips sweat from my forehead
as it whispers within the corners of my
brain
stories, unimaginable.



Susan Fant, *Prayer Hall*, photography

WAITING FOR DAWN

by Ellyn Sibley

The nights were always too long. He huddled closer to the cement wall of the bridge beneath the overpass, pulling his thin coat tighter around himself in an effort to keep the cold from seeping through to his skin. Winter, even in northern Alabama, was brutal, and it always made him wish he had a drink to warm him, to help him forget where he was and how he'd gotten here. At least a drink would dull his senses and numb his pain. He tilted his face upward and slowly closed his eyes, waiting for either sleep or memories to claim him.

Jameson opened his eyes to her face. He smiled and kissed her cheek softly so he wouldn't wake her, then quietly rose from the bed. His sense of equilibrium took a while to kick in as he staggered down the stairs to the kitchen. The "on" button to the coffee maker glowed red when he pressed it, and out of habit he glanced up the stairs toward the open bedroom door. He didn't like the taste of coffee himself,

but the aroma never failed to rouse her, so he'd gotten into the habit of starting it for her every morning. While he waited for her to join him in the kitchen, he grabbed the chocolate milk out of the fridge and poured some into a glass. He knew how much she hated it when he drank straight out of the jug.

Within minutes she tottered in, eyes half-closed and hair piled on top of her head in a messy ponytail. She headed straight for the coffee without even glancing over to where he sat on a barstool at the counter. She poured a generous amount of flavored creamer into her coffee, then turned to him and smiled sleepily. She leaned over and rested her elbows on the counter opposite him as she sipped her coffee, looking up at him from underneath delicate eyelashes. Neither of them spoke. She drank her coffee and he watched her. He finally leaned over to kiss her, tasting vanilla caramel along with bitter coffee on her lips. She kissed the day-old stubble on his chin, then rinsed her mug in the sink and went back upstairs to shower and dress.



Robin Barnett, *Untitled*, digital film

Jameson woke up and craned his neck first right and then left to stretch the stiffness from it. He sat up from his slumped position against the bridge and looked around, trying to figure out what time it was. The Huntsville traffic wasn't busy overhead, so he guessed it was between midnight and three in the morning. The grumbling of his stomach reminded him that the package of stale crackers he'd snatched from an O'Charley's garbage dumpster was still in his pocket, so he pulled them out and began eating absentmindedly. He reached into his inside pocket for the bottle that he always kept with him, but then remembered that only a drop or two remained. He sighed. He'd been avoiding a trip to the 7-Eleven for a while, but now he had to go. Rising stiffly from the cold ground, he began walking down Memorial Parkway in the direction of the store.

For the umpteenth time, Jameson returned from the bathroom and lay down on the couch, exhausted. He had never been completely drunk until last night. Yesterday, the defense contracting firm where he worked had passed out pink slips to Jameson and five others. The boss said it was due to "end-of-the-year down-sizing," or something to that effect. Though Jameson was not in the habit of drinking to excess, the first thing he'd wanted to do after leaving his office was to pay a visit to the nearest bar. By eleven o'clock that night, when he finally answered his wife's worried

calls, he had completely lost count of how many drinks he'd consumed. In a drunken stupor, Jameson explained everything to her over the phone, and asked her to come and pick him up. When they got home she had gone straight to bed, uptight about the job loss and more than a little upset with him—both for the drinking and for ignoring her calls. After a while, Jameson followed her to bed, only to be awakened within the hour by the churning in his stomach. He'd spent the whole night by the toilet. Jameson hoped that his wife would be more concerned than angry when she found him on the couch in the morning, pale and tired. In an effort to get comfortable, he rolled over to his side and propped one arm underneath his head. He finally fell into a deep sleep, and didn't move again until he heard the sound of coffee brewing a couple of hours later.

Head down, Jameson entered the 7-Eleven. He never knew who would be working the late shift, and some of the

*He had never been
completely
drunk
until last night*

employees—especially the new kids—didn't like it when homeless people like him came in. They always followed him around and asked too many questions. He didn't like them. He hoped Carl would be working instead. Carl was an older guy who seemed to understand him, even take pity on him. Jameson couldn't be certain, but he had a suspicion that sometimes Carl looked the other way whenever Jameson slipped a can of beer into his coat pocket. With these thoughts in mind, Jameson peeked hopefully over at the person sitting at the cash register, then groaned inwardly. Some new kid sat behind the front counter, a boy with curly brown hair, big glasses, and a nametag that read "Daryl." As expected, his eyes followed Jameson's every move.

Though he knew he was being watched, Jameson wandered as innocently as possible to the back of the store to survey the alcohol section. He felt the kid's eyes on his back and knew he'd be booted out of the store if he even reached for a can of beer. To appear more casual, he walked down the chip-and-candy aisles, looking for something cheap. While he was stopped in front of the candy bars, a couple of teenagers came in. They were too loud and took a long time to find a snack, but when they finally went to the counter to pay, they provided just the temporary distraction that Jameson needed. He quickly pulled a can of beer from the cooler and dropped it into his coat pocket.

After the two teenagers left, Jameson threw a 68-cent candy bar onto the front

counter. He slid a few coins to the kid, who was still eyeing him suspiciously, then took his candy bar and left as quickly as he could, trying not to look or feel guilty.

Well, look who finally decided to come home." She greeted him coldly from her place on the couch, and Jameson paused for a moment in the doorway, his state of intoxication making it difficult for him to discern that she was angry. A grin spread across his face. "Well hey, darlin'," he drawled, coming toward her with arms outstretched.

"Oh, no. You are not going to hug me, not when you smell so bad." Her voice was heavy with contempt, but Jameson didn't notice.

"I just want to tell you how much I missed you, baby," he slurred.

"You missed me? Really." Her tone lowered, and Jameson stopped moving toward her. "I find that hard to believe. I've been waiting on you for five hours now."

She didn't even blink when he bumped hard into the arm of the couch and almost fell to the floor. He steadied himself on the back of the sofa and squinted at her, trying to decipher her expression. "Are you mad, baby?"

"Yes, I'm mad. I'm furious with you." Her voice had lost all trace of civility, and Jameson slowly began to realize that he was in trouble.

"This is the third night this week that you've come home later than midnight, so drunk that you can't even walk

straight. You can't keep doing this, Jameson. You can't do this to yourself, and you certainly can't do this to me."

When Jameson didn't move or even try to speak, she continued. "I can't believe you're still mourning over your lost job. We have bills to pay, Jameson, and I can't pay them with my salary alone. Every day you come home drunk is one day closer to losing this house. Is that what you want?"

Jameson shook his head, but even that simple action caused a wave of dizziness to sweep over him. He tipped to the left as he tried to take another step toward her, but quickly grabbed for the couch again as he lost his balance. "Don't be mad at me," he pleaded loudly.

She ignored the comment. "Just know that I can't put up with this much longer." Before going up the stairs, she turned to say one last thing. "Oh, and sleep on the couch tonight. I'm not having your smelly, disgusting body in my bed." With that, she stomped up the stairs and into her room, closing and locking the door behind her.

Jameson stared after her, stupefied. He took a few more wobbly steps toward the staircase. "Now baby, c'mon. You don't mean that. C'mere." He waited for her to reappear in the upstairs hallway, but she didn't come back out. He leaned back on his heels and called loudly enough for her to hear. "Okay, baby, I know you're mad. Just c'mere and let me talk to you. Hey! Baby?"

Jameson backed away from the staircase and fell onto the couch, punching

at the pillows a few times. Despite the alcohol, her words were beginning to sting, and Jameson felt a sudden wave of guilt. "Don't be mad at me, baby," he whispered to himself. "I'll try harder." Unfortunately, his resolve didn't even last twenty-four hours.

A loose chink of pavement tripped him up, and he stubbed every toe on one foot. The initial stab of pain lessened to a dull throb after a moment or two, and Jameson cursed as he bent down to inspect his injury. The sight of the new hole in the toe of his shoe made him growl. His shoes were thin enough as it was, without the extra rips from this road that was forever in need of repaving. He sat down on the sidewalk a fair distance from the convenience store and pulled out the Hershey bar and the can of beer. Popping the top of the beer can, he took a big gulp before biting off half of the candy bar. In a matter of seconds he was crumpling the empty paper wrapper in one hand and digging through his coat for the glass bottle with the other. He poured the rest of the beer into the bottle to save for later, then stood and tossed the candy wrapper into a nearby trash bucket. Empty beer can still in hand, he walked down the sidewalk of the Parkway. It was time to pay a visit to Harley.

Harley was an old man who camped a couple of streets down from Jameson under another overpass. When they met two years ago, Harley had felt sorry for the younger man, so he'd proposed "do-

*Unfortunately, his resolve
didn't even last
twenty-four hours*

ing business.” For years, to make a little money, Harley had tirelessly collected aluminum cans and carried them to the recycling facility across town. Each year, the trip became more difficult for the old man, so he offered Jameson half of the meager profit if Jameson would deliver the cans for recycling. Jameson had readily agreed; he certainly needed a little money.

Jameson waved to Harley, who grinned a toothless grin and waved his young friend over. As Jameson came closer, Harley pointed at the two sacks of aluminum cans he’d collected since Jameson’s last visit over a week ago.

“Look at all this,” Harley said proudly. “I must’ve found one whole sackful when I went by this one house. ‘Looked like they’d had a party or somethin’, ‘cause their trash cans were just about overflowin’ with all these.” He gestured to the sacks again.

Jameson tossed his own empty can into one of the sacks. “These will get us a couple of dollars, at least,” he said. Harley nodded in agreement.

“How’ve you been doing this week?” Jameson asked.

Harley held up his hands. “Oh, I’ve been doin’ about as good as you, I expect. I’m just livin’ until I die, that’s all.” He chuckled at his own joke, but

sobered quickly when he noticed Jameson wasn’t laughing. “So how’ve you been holding up, son?”

Jameson shrugged, looking away. “Same as always, I guess. Getting by.”

Harley turned knowing eyes on Jameson’s face. “You still seein’ her?”

Uncomfortable with the questions, he shrugged again and shoved his hands deep into his coat pockets. He kept staring past Harley at the highway.

“Now son, I don’t want to preach at you or nothin’, but you gotta let go.”

“I know it,” Jameson said, a mixture of impatience and regret in his tone.

Harley took the hint and wisely changed the subject. “Yep, these cans’ll sure bring in some money. Here, take ‘em now. They don’t do me no good sittin’ here.” He watched Jameson’s face as the younger man took one sack in each hand. “See you next week, I’m guessin’?” He called to Jameson’s retreating back.

“Yeah,” Jameson answered. He looked to the horizon, knowing it wouldn’t be long before the sun would cast its first rays of dawn.

On a muggy night in July, roughly six months after he’d lost his job, Jameson visited the now-familiar bar for the fifth time in a week. Though he downed fewer beers than usual, he sat in the same place at the counter for several hours, watching a Braves baseball game on the large TV screen in the corner. Just before five in the morning he finally pulled his keys from

his pocket and left for home.

As soon as he turned his Lexus into the driveway, he noticed the lights on throughout the house. Suddenly panicked, he fumbled with his keys for a few moments in the door lock before finally managing to wrench it open. An hour ago, he had hoped to simply slink in and go to bed, avoiding all confrontation with her, but upon stepping inside, he was greeted with several stacks of boxes all over the living room. A wave of anger followed a moment of confusion, and he stormed up the stairs in search of her. He found her packing up more boxes in their bedroom. As usual, she ignored him and didn't even look up when he entered.

"What is all that stuff in there?" He

asked, though he feared what her answer would be.

"It's my stuff." She still didn't look up.

"Why?"

"You know why, Jameson. I'm leaving."

Her resigned tone made him even angrier. "You can't leave!"

"I can, and I am. I've waited on you to come around—to quit the constant drinking and look for work again like a responsible adult, but you haven't." Her voice broke a little as she finished.

Bewildered, he grasped for something to say. "Where are you going?"

"Does it matter?" She finished



Rebecca Renfroe, *Georgia Nostalgia*, photography

taping another box closed and carried it past him and down the stairs and stacked it on top of the others. Jameson kept begging for answers, but she refused to tell him anything else. After she taped the last box shut, she began loading all of them into her car. Jameson made one last protest as she dropped the final box onto the front seat.

“Baby, stay here.” Jameson began to get tearful, panicky. “I promise I’ll change. I’ll straighten up, look for work like you’ve been wanting me to. I’ll get help—”

She finally looked up into his face. She seemed completely—maddeningly in control, but Jameson saw unshed tears in her eyes.

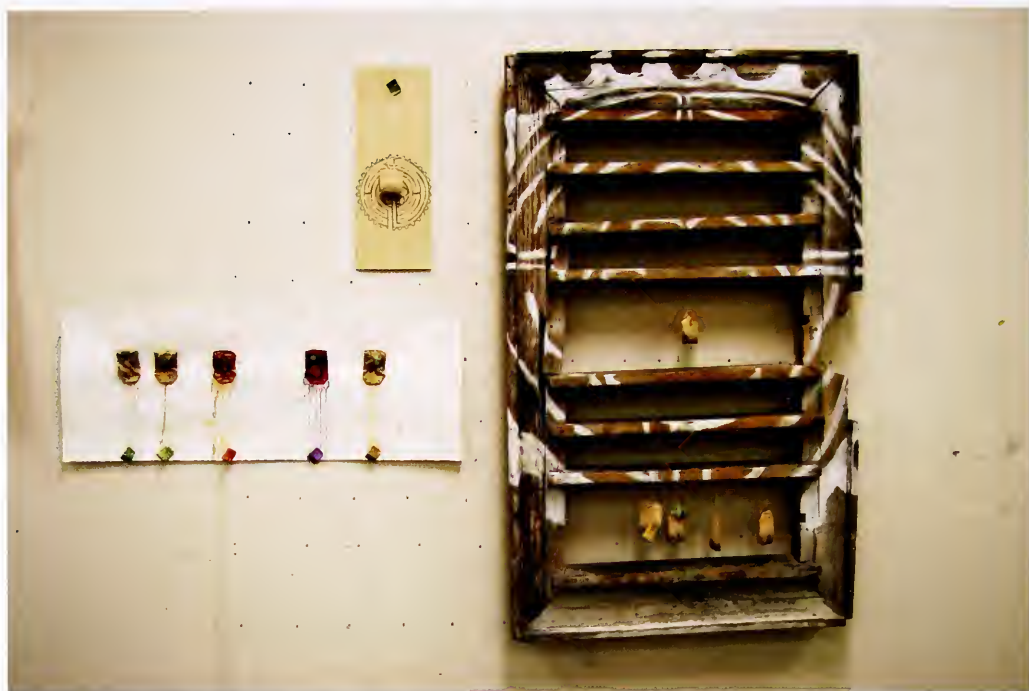
“Don’t bother trying to talk me out of this, Jameson. It’s bad enough that you’re ruining your own life, and that you don’t even *care*, but I won’t let mine be ruined, too.” With that, she got into her car and pulled away, wiping at her cheeks with the back of one hand. And then she was gone.

The two-lane roads were beginning to get busy again as early-risers headed to work. Shouldering one of the sacks of cans, Jameson began walking away from the highway and toward West End, an old residential neighborhood downtown. As he shuffled past several motionless cars at a red light, Jameson kept his gaze straight ahead. He was learning to ignore the stares from everyone, but he still hated it when he saw women push down the locks in their cars as he passed by.

It took him the better part of an hour to reach West End, which he passed through at least once a week on the way to the recycling facility. He always came early in the morning, because he knew he would be able to see her then.

He stopped across the street from the house, and stood among the ancient oak trees that lined the neighborhood sidewalks. He gently sat both bags on the ground at his feet. He would see her soon. Her baby always woke up about this time to eat. He waited a few minutes, rubbing his hands together and blowing on them to keep them warm. Finally, he saw a hallway light flick on through an upstairs window. A few minutes later, a downstairs table lamp turned on, too. And then he could see her, cradling her baby and rubbing his back while she heated up a bottle. After another five minutes or so, she sat in the rocking chair in front of the unlit fireplace and held the bottle to the baby’s mouth.

Jameson watched her for a long time. She fed and burped the baby, then rocked him until he fell asleep. As the sun was coming up over the treetops of the great old oaks, she stood, put the bottle in the sink, and turned off the lamp before heading back upstairs. The hallway light switched off again, and Jameson reached for the sacks of cans.



Sarah Carroll and Corinna Ray, *My First Time: Printmaking Room, 4 AM*, mixed media

LANDING **IN** ATLANTA

by Katie Adams

blanket of the gods
protects a city of
machines
and appointments as it
draws near
with the rapidity of
a romantic date unwanted
through the
black—guided by moon's
placid dream,
luring engines of flight like
magnets
to the edge of the
thickest waves and through
to the core—
an encompassing layer
of fluff
where noise stops and thoughts
slow until
mechanics thrust
through sleepy eyes
into blue-tinted
consciousness
of coffee,
interstates and time

S
 ST
 STA
 STAR
 STARS
 TARS
 ARS
 RS
 S

by MacKenzie
 Smith

As my first ever birthday present,
 My parents gave me a fragile clay-pot wit
 and an empty box labeled with a note card,
 Scotch taped in red pen...
 "Courage"

So I'm not the sort of man
 with the nerve
 To mention that you laugh just like
 How I imagine purple feels
 When you glimpse it after hours of white,
 A head rush of beautiful
 on a canvas of

I forgot,

I was raised in a world of facts
 where all this boiling water
 spat up sleet
 Love was a swear word
 and any flourish of vocabulary
 was just fancy talk.

In a perfect world
 my mother's name would be Music
 and my father's, Language.
 His blood would be made of letters
 his pulsing poetry.
 So mine,
 with chromosomes of sound and syllables entwined,
 could synthesize my thoughts to melody

But
 As far away as is the perfect world
 So too strays my carnal knowledge of sound
 and my words are stale to taste
 explaining every flavor I remember
 in wafer thin analogy.

Now before I embarrass myself even further...

I don't know.

I stare at gluttoned Grande Pianos
and see the notes within them swarming
in harmony as thick as blood.
But to beg the keys
to set free note by note,
would be a crime of passion.

I could mutter disconnected sounds
to no avail
Then gore the side of some sleeping Grande
and let it flow
in perfect order
and then you'd hear the essence
of this pathetic cerebral mess
and we'd probably fall in love.

So I stab the sides of paper
and what produced
is but a leak of what I want to speak.
That's fine...
at least I'm charming
Right?

...
So, I wrote you a poem
don't laugh
or do
i'd settle for that

Once a year
I have a love affair with stars

The jealous city lights oppress.
So I escape from time to time
to dark extremes,
Her carhorn/siren rants behind me.

While we waltz and whisper
I whimsy
that were they,
the stars,
to burn just once a year
to descend and dance with everyone,
It would be a holiday.
The christmas of dark
Everyone would lay here just like this
Every eye on heaven
and....
oh my god...
This is...

But if you only ignited
once a year
the same night as the stars,
with everyone absorbed to sky,
obsessed on useless embers,
I'd forget about the air
and be just as speechless
as I am now.

CRITIQUE FOR A **BALLET** DANCER

by Lindsay Carter

Make movement transport music.
A constant striving for aesthetic lines;
Body and rhythm must be intrinsic.

Make every pirouette landing stick
Always yearning what a dancer pines:
To make movement transport music.

Like fingers on guitar strings pick
Your piques sharp and crisp like tines,
Body and rhythm must be intrinsic.

Smooth arms float and lick
The air, no elbows, like fluid vines.
Make movement transport music

and interpret emotion with soft click
Of pointe shoes on marley and pantomimes,
Body and rhythm must be intrinsic.

Work through fatigue, hair and face sweat-slick
With a precision that stimulates and shines.
Make movement transport music,
Body and rhythm must be intrinsic.



Corinna Ray, *Untitled*, mixed media

JUNE 26, 1988

by Angel Vuong

It can only increase once the road is a one-way street
Irreversibility, called the arrow of time

Children's rooms left
Wood rots, metal rusts, people wrinkle
Even mountains, even the nuclei of atoms
We see entropy and worn-out sidewalks
increasing disorder without asking, "What is old?"

We were suddenly back on an old building
We saw an egg unscramble
We would laugh - laugh at a movie run backward
With every increase, opportunity is lost

Water can be made, but all the water is entropy
All the cold air broke down the warm into a lukewarm mass
Energy diffused into a chaotic cauldron of purpose

People see in their own lives
Like molecules, they feel lost at every turn
Partners are guaranteeing that they will fall
in the avalanche of disorders ready to swallow us all
Galaxies of ordered beauty see where stars spend their days

The creation of life soaks up some carbon,
arranges it into a rose in the room,
and transforms it
into a baby



Rachel Kilgore, *Untitled*, pinecones and string

UNTITLED PREGNANCY SCREEPLAY

by Meredith Wiggins

OPEN ON: INT. BATHROOM – MORNING – THE PRESENT

A small, slightly dingy bathroom, equipped with nothing more than a toilet and a sink with a mirror. In the background, we hear SINGING – hymns.

ELIZABETH, seventeen, neat and pretty in an unassuming sort of way, stands with her hands braced on the edge of the sink. She stares hard at herself in the mirror. Her face is inscrutable.

ANNA (V.O.) Four more minutes.

[Elizabeth, usually called Lizzy, continues to stare into the mirror. Abruptly, she shuts her eyes.]

CUT TO:

A series of establishing shots of a street in small-town Harrison, Nebraska – a few vehicles drive by, lone customers duck in and out of the shops. Things are slow. It's coming winter.

CUT TO: EXT. ED'S DINER – DAY

Cars and trucks are parked in the small parking lot. An old painted sign says ED'S in faded red letters. We HOLD on this for a few moments before we

CUT TO: INT. ED'S DINER – DAY

Inside, things are busier. The place is a typical small-town greasy spoon, popular with everyone because there's nowhere else to go. In a corner booth, with a group of young people, we see Lizzy. TIM, her boyfriend – also seventeen, an All-American jock type – has his arm around her shoulders. Tim and the others are finishing up eating, while Lizzy has hardly touched her food. The group talks among itself, while Lizzy is mostly silent, speaking only when spoken to. She is trying to look normal, but it's not working. Part of the group drifts off, leaving Tim and Lizzy with ERIC, an easygoing,

plain guy, and ALLISON, his sarcastic, equally plain girlfriend.

TIM: I'm telling you, they don't play for shit though. You know I'm right, man. You know I'm right!

ERIC: Whatever, Tim. We'll see come Bowl Season.

TIM: Yeah, we will. The Huskers are where it's gonna be! You're so wrong, man. You're so wrong.

ERIC: Yeah, save your swagger for when you're on the team.

ALLISON: I still can't believe you and Lizzy aren't going to the same school.

TIM: Whatever, Omaha's not that far from Lincoln. We'll see each other all the time.

ERIC: Yeah, you say that now, man, but wait 'til it's the middle of game season and your ass is on the road every week. See how much you see your girl then.

TIM: Well, she can come and see me. Right, baby?

LIZZY: Huh? ...Oh, yeah, sure.

ALLISON: You feeling okay, Liz? You didn't eat.

LIZZY: My stomach's kind of upset.

TIM: Hey, you mind if I –

LIZZY: No, go for it.

[Tim cleans her plate in a remarkably short amount of time. Lizzy barely notices – she is preoccupied.]

ALLISON: Fuck, it's already past five. I gotta go. See you guys later?

ERIC: Yeah, me too. See you around.

[Tim attempts to say good-bye, but his mouth is full of Lizzy's hamburger. He mumbles something, food falling out of his mouth.]

ALLISON: I see why you like him so much, Lizzy.

[Allison and Eric exit. Tim finishes the last of Lizzy's food and turns to her:]

TIM: Okay, well I gotta go, babe, but I'll see you at Anna's later, right?

LIZZY: Yeah, probably.

TIM: *(gesturing toward the check)* You okay here? You need some help?

LIZZY: No, I got it. I'm good.

TIM: Okay. Love you, baby, see you later.

[He leans in and pecks her on the lips.]

LIZZY: Mmm-hmm. Bye.

Tim leaves. Lizzy watches him go, waiting until she sees him get in his car and drive away to dig through her pocket, pull out some bills, and drop them on the table. She leaves the diner, visibly agitated. We track her as she walks a couple of blocks past various semi-dilapidated storefronts, the cold air making her breath come out in puffs, until she finally reaches the SHOP-N-SAVE FOOD AND DRUG MART.

EXT. SHOP-N-SAVE FOOD AND DRUG MART – DAY

As Lizzy approaches the building, we see that outside the main entrance are some quarter-per-turn rides for kids – a rocket, a horse. A MOTHER places her LITTLE GIRL on the rocket and tries to put her LITTLE BOY on the horse. The little boy is not happy about it.

LITTLE BOY: But I don't wanna ride the horsie! Horsies is for girls!

MOTHER: You can ride the rocket next time, honey –

LITTLE BOY: I wanna ride the rocket now! Rockets are for boys! I wanna ride the rocket noooow!

MOTHER: You better stop that, you better stop that right now –

LITTLE GIRL: Mommy, make him stop, he's being mean.

LITTLE BOY: I want the rocket! I want the rocket! I want the rocket!

[The NOISE of their argument follows Lizzy into the store.]

CUT TO: INT. SHOP-N-SAVE FOOD AND DRUG MART – DAY

We follow Lizzy as she walks up and down several aisles, occasionally examining random items. She is attempting – but not succeeding – to look as though she is just browsing, until she finally reaches her destination – the “women’s health” aisle. She is surrounded by every type of feminine hygiene product imaginable, but she knows exactly what it is that she’s looking for: she stops to the side of the home pregnancy tests and lets her eyes drift toward them, scanning the labels surreptitiously. As she reaches out to take one, MRS. RODER, a cheerful, plump woman in her late forties, enters the aisle, pushing a buggy.

MRS. RODER: Lizzy!

LIZZY: *(snatching her hand back, shaken)* I – Mrs. Roder, hi, how are you.

MRS. RODER: Oh, fine, fine. Just here picking up some “supplies” for Janie. I’m sure
you know how that goes.

LIZZY: Yeah, yes ma’am, definitely. I mean, that’s what I’m here for.

[She reaches out and grabs the nearest package of pads.]

MRS. RODER: Well, that’s just one of the many joys of womanhood. Periods and childbirth.

[Mrs. Roder LAUGHS loudly at her own joke. Lizzy joins in weakly.]

MRS. RODER: How’s your mom and dad doing? I haven’t seen them in – feels like ages. I just keep missing them at service.

LIZZY: They’re good, they – they’re doing good.

MRS. RODER: And your grandma? She’s doing better?

LIZZY: Yeah, she’s doing fine.

MRS. RODER: I saw on the prayer list that her hip was giving her trouble again.

LIZZY: Nope, she’s – she’s doing good, we’re all doing good.

MRS. RODER: Well. I’m glad to hear it. You tell everyone at your house that I said hello, alright? Just in case I miss them again tomorrow at church.

LIZZY: Yes ma’am, I will.

*“Well, that’s just one of the many joys of
womanhood. Periods and childbirth”*

[Mrs. Roder has been scanning the display through much of their conversation. She finally locates the brand of tampons she wants to buy and throws them in her cart.]

MRS. RODER: You take care, now, Lizzy. Bye-bye.

[Mrs. Roder begins to walk away, then stops and turns back to Lizzy.]

MRS. RODER: Oh, and Lizzy, ask your mom if she still has my casserole dish, will you? I can't find it anywhere.

LIZZY: Sure.

MRS. RODER: It's the green one.

LIZZY: Yeah, I'll ask her.

MRS. RODER: And if she does have it, have her bring it to church tomorrow, will you?

LIZZY: *(exasperated)* Yes!

[There is a pause before Mrs. Roder replies, a little hurt.]

MRS. RODER: Okay, well. Thanks bunches. I'll see you tomorrow?

LIZZY: *(slightly apologetic)* Yes ma'am.

MRS. RODER: Alright, bye-bye.

As soon as Mrs. Roder is out of sight, Lizzy turns back to the pregnancy tests. She glances around to make sure no one is watching her, then grabs a random test and pushes it quickly up the sleeve of her jacket, shoving her hands into her pockets.

Lizzy walks quickly toward the store's exit, where TWO WOMEN are exiting, several plastic bags of merchandise in their hands. Lizzy walks out the doors at the same time the others do. An ALARM sounds. The other two women stop as an EMPLOYEE approaches, reaching for their bags; Lizzy keeps walking, head down, out into the largely empty parking lot. The ALARM continues to ring out.

CUT TO: EXT. SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOOD – DUSK

A quiet, slightly run-down street. The houses are big but in some disrepair. Lizzy walks quickly down the sidewalk, head bowed, shoulders hunched against the wind, her hands still firmly in her pockets. She passes by a long, low house. A dog is BARKING loudly from within, high-pitched yaps that startle Lizzy out of her stupor.

LIZZY: *(murmured)* Shut up, shut up, shut up, you dumb dog.

She glances apprehensively at the house next to the blue house – hers – a two-story somewhat neater than the houses surrounding it. She bypasses the front door, instead walking to the far side of her house, where we see a side entrance.

INT. ANSEN HOME KITCHEN – DUSK

The kitchen is out-of-date but clean and well-kept. A few attempts have been made to dress it up a bit – a ruffled, country-style valance hangs in the window over the sink, a frame displays a cross-stitched sampler reading "GOD BLESS OUR HOME." The fridge is covered in magnets and clippings, photographs and to-do lists.

ALICE ANSEN stands over the stove, stirring something in a pot. Alice is in her early forties; once beautiful, she still retains a kind of faded prettiness. She is the kind of woman who relies on knowing that she would be a stunner if she lost twenty-five pounds. She is HUMMING along to the radio, which is playing adult contemporary music at a low volume.

Through a pass-through over the stove, we see her husband, PHIL ANSEN, in the den. He is roughly the same age as his wife. There is something brutishly interesting about his face. He is a big man, but not fat; he looks like he was once powerful. He is stretched out stiffly in a recliner in a way that suggests he is in some physical discomfort, watching a game show on the television. The VOLUME on the screen is incredibly loud.

GAME-SHOW ANNOUNCER (V.O.): This American president served the shortest term of office of any man elected to the job, serving just thirty-one days before dying of pneumonia.

[On the screen, a BUZZER sounds.]

GAME-SHOW ANNOUNCER (V.O.): Yes, Carla?

CARLA (V.O.): Rutherford B. Hayes.

GAME-SHOW ANNOUNCER (V.O.): I'm sorry, Carla, the correct answer is William Henry Harrison. William Henry Harrison, the ninth President of the United States.

ALICE: *(calling out)* Phil, could you turn that down a little? I can hardly hear the radio.

PHIL: *(gruffly)* They don't talk loud enough to turn it down any.

ALICE: Just a little.

PHIL: You've had that radio on all day, and I haven't said a word –

[As he speaks, the outside door into the kitchen opens. Lizzy enters, red from the cold. Her mom smiles at her as she continues stirring the pot on the stove.]

ALICE: Okay, okay, Phil, don't get upset. Hi, hon. Come give me a kiss.

[Lizzy approaches her mother and kisses her on the cheek. Her hands are still in her pockets.]

LIZZY: Hi, mom.

ALICE: Sit down and talk to me a while. I hope you're hungry. I'm making your favorite.

LIZZY: Oh, uh, actually, I ate while I was out. Sorry.

ALICE: Oh. Well, that's alright. Just keep me company then.

LIZZY: Can I go to the bathroom first?

ALICE: *(laughing)* Well, I guess if you must, you must. Of course you can, you silly girl.

[She notices that Lizzy has not removed her hands from her pockets.]

ALICE: What's wrong with your hands, bug?

[Lizzy begins to fumble for an answer; but she is cut off by the noise of the dog from next door beginning to BARK again, loudly. Even with the noise from the radio and the television, the dog's yaps are audible.]

ALICE: *(frustrated)* I swear to my time, if that dog doesn't quit yapping right this minute-

PHIL: You'll what?

[Alice ignores the question and continues on.]

ALICE: That woman's got no right to disturb us like that. I mean if it was only every once in a while, that would be one thing, but it's every day, it's every single time someone goes by! You can hear it plain as day! But every time I mention it, it's 'no, not my dog, not Mr. Snuffles, he never makes a peep.'

[Mid-way through her speech, Phil mutes the television.]

PHIL: We get it, Alice. Now I'm trying to watch -

ALICE: Lizzy, it's got to bother you. Your window is right across from where he sits.

LIZZY: *(shrugging)* I just tune it out.

ALICE: I don't see how you can. It's so loud.

LIZZY: Maybe it's just because you're here all day long.

PHIL: I'm here all day long. It doesn't bother me.

ALICE: *(turning to Phil)* But you're parked in front of the T.V. all day with the sound cranked up so loud I can't hear myself think.

PHIL: *(with growing irritation)* Funny you can still hear the damn dog.

LIZZY: Mom, I've really got to -

[Alice waves dismissively, turning back to her cooking.]

ALICE: Go on, go on.

[Lizzy exits, heads down the hallway, and we...]

CUT TO: INT. ANSEN HOME STAIRWAY - DUSK

Lizzy charges up a flight of stairs in a dark, wood-paneled hallway, taking the stairs two at a time. The NOISE from the scene she has left behind is still faintly audible. The camera pans over the family portraits that decorate the wall - Lizzy as a baby, Lizzy at her kindergarten graduation, a younger Lizzy and Tim at a school dance - and lingers on one of a much, much younger Alice, looking incredibly like Lizzy, holding her baby daughter in her arms.

CUT TO: INT. ANSEN HOME BATHROOM - DUSK

Lizzy enters the bathroom, slamming the door behind her and locking it. The bathroom is small to the point of being cramped. Like the rest of the house, it is out-of-date but clean. Through a window beside the toilet, we can see the sun setting behind the roofs of the other houses.

Lizzy finally removes her hands from her pockets, shaking the pregnancy test out of her sleeve. It falls to the floor. She picks it up and reads the writing on the back of the package aloud.

LIZZY: *(muttered quickly)* "Remove test from packaging. Urinate on strip. In three to five minutes, results should become apparent. A plus sign indicates a positive result, a minus sign a negative result." *(pause)* Three to five minutes.

She begins to open the package with fumbling fingers, tearing open the box and removing the test. She tosses the box into the small garbage can by the toilet, then thinks better of it, digging it out of the trash, folding it up, and putting it back in her jacket pocket.

Carefully, Lizzy places the test on the edge of the sink and undoes her belt, unzips and lowers her pants and underwear. She sits down on the toilet and takes a deep breath, resting her head in her hands. It is the first time she has let herself get visibly overwhelmed – she has been nervous and on-edge up until now, but she always seemed in control. For a moment, at least, she lets herself be terrified.

It lasts only a few seconds. She visibly gathers herself, reaching for the test. She stares hard at it for a few moments, then moves to put it in position.

From somewhere else in the house comes a loud THUMP, followed by a CRASH. Lizzy freezes.



Krystal Tibbs, *14 Weeks*, oil on canvas

ALICE (V.O.): Mom? Mom? Mom! Oh, God, Mom –

PHIL (V.O.): Alice? What is it? What's wrong?

ALICE (V.O.): *(shouting)* Lizzy! Lizzy! Come here, you have to help me – Lizzy, hurry – Grandma fell – Phil, don't get up, your back, don't –

[Lizzy hesitates, then pulls her pants back up, stuffs the test in her jacket pocket, and leaves the bathroom.]

LIZZY: I'm coming, Mom – I'm coming right now –

CUT TO: INT. BEDROOM – NIGHT

GWEN JAMESON, Alice's mother, is in her mid-seventies, small and frail-looking. She is sprawled on the floor, twisted in a very painful-looking way from the waist down. A metal food-tray and some spilled food are on the floor around her. Alice crouches on the floor, arms hooked under her mother's armpits, trying to pull her up.

ALICE: *(trying to be calm)* I'm going to try to get you up, okay, Mom?

GWEN: *(vague, unfocused)* I was – I was just going to go to the bathroom –

ALICE: I know, Mom, I know. On three, okay? One – two – three –

[Alice gives an upward heave. Gwen MOANS loudly, in pain.]

ALICE: No? You can't – not at all?

Gwen moans again, more softly.

ALICE: *(with a heavy sigh)* Okay. Okay, Mom, okay. I'll – one of us will – *(yelling)*

Lizzy! *(normal volume)* One of us is going to get you to the hospital.

[Lizzy enters. Alice looks to her.]

ALICE: Lizzy, hon, call 911, okay. Tell them Grandma fell and hurt herself – *(to*

Gwen) it's your hip, right, Mom? The hip again? – *(not waiting for an answer)*

Hurt her hip again, and we can't get her up. Call now, hon.

While Lizzy pulls out her cell phone and dials 911, Alice strokes her mother's hair and mumbles soothing streams of nothingness into her ear. Lizzy stares at them, at the way her mother is treating her grandmother like a little child.

ALICE: S'okay, Mom, hon. It's going to be okay.

[We hear the RINGING of the telephone faintly, then a CLICK as the line picks up.]

OPERATOR (V.O.): Hello, this is emergency assistance.

LIZZY: *(into phone, staring at her mom)* Yeah, hi. We need help.

CUT TO: INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

A drab hospital room, with taupe walls and generic landscape prints hanging at eye-level – the finest room that reduced-coverage insurance will buy. Gwen is being helped into her bed by a large male ORDERLY. Alice is attempting to be helpful, all but wringing her hands in stress. It is a semi-private room, and Gwen has a roommate,

but the paper room-divider is drawn, so that we cannot see the patient behind it. Lizzy sits slumped down in a plastic chair. Her posture is the opposite of Phil's, who still holds himself stiffly, as upright as possible in his chair. The orderly gets Gwen situated comfortably, then peeks around the edge of the curtain.

ORDERLY: How you doing, Mrs. Chisolm? That stomach giving you trouble today?

MRS. CHISOLM (V.O.): Oh, a little, a little.

ORDERLY: Okay, well, you need anything, you just call, alright? Okay, then.

He smiles at the Ansens and exits.

Lizzy shifts a bit, restless. Her eyes dart back and forth between the door to the hallway and the in-suite bathroom. One hand is gripping the arm of the chair, the other is buried in her jacket pocket, grasping and releasing the unseen test. Lizzy's eyes flick to the in-suite bathroom. She stares at it for a moment then sneaks a glance at her parents. Neither is paying attention to her. We can practically see the wheels turning in her mind: should she risk it?

Just then, her dad shifts in his chair, turning his body towards her. He gives her a strained half-smile, which she half-heartedly returns. That decides it: no in-suite bathroom. She looks again at the door to the hallway.

LIZZY: *(makes up her mind to go)* Hey, I'm just gonna grab a drink -

[She is interrupted by the entrance of DR. JULIA MATHIS, a tall, striking woman in her late fifties.]

DR. MATHIS: Mr. and Mrs. Ansen?

[Alice crosses to her and shakes her hand. Phil maneuvers himself to his feet. Lizzy stands as well, to the side.]

ALICE: Yes, I'm - I'm Mrs. Ansen. Alice. This is my husband, Phil. Oh, and our daughter, Lizzy.

DR. MATHIS: Alice, Phil, I'm Dr. Mathis. I'll be looking after Mrs. Jameson tonight. She's suffered a femoral neck fracture, which means a fracture has occurred below the ball of the ball-and-socket of the hip joint. Now, I see from her chart that she's had one of these before. The good news is that in Ms. Jameson's case, it's not looking like a particularly severe fracture, but the reduced blood flow means that without surgery it might not heal properly. We've admitted her overnight to keep an eye on her, but we should be able to schedule surgery for tomorrow and have her up and out of here fairly soon.

ALICE: But the surgery isn't serious?

DR. MATHIS: Not particularly, no.

[Throughout this, Lizzy has been stealing nervous glances at the door.]

LIZZY: Mom, I'm gonna go get a drink, okay?

ALICE: *(distractedly)* Sure, hon, okay.

[Lizzy begins to exit.]

ALICE: Oh, Lizzy, wait.

[Alice grabs her purse and digs, searching for spare change.]

ALICE: Grab me a cup of coffee, hon, would you? Phil, you want anything?

PHIL: No.

[Alice pulls out a handful of change and gives it to Lizzy.]

ALICE: Okay. Just the coffee for me, bug.

Lizzy nods and exits, pocketing the change.

CUT TO: INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - NIGHT

Lizzy makes a bee-line for the door marked "BATHROOM" at the opposite end of the floor. She is not quite there when we hear her CELL PHONE RINGTONE go off. The look on Lizzy's face says she would like to ignore the call, but the name on the display changes her mind: ANNA, it reads, in all caps.

LIZZY: *(into phone)* Hey.

CUT TO: INT. ANNA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

In the background, groups of teenagers are mingling, laughing, and shouting. Red plastic Solo cups are in every hand. Loud HIP-HOP MUSIC is playing. Lizzy's best friend, ANNA, also seventeen, is the kind of beautiful that intimidates men and women alike. She carries herself with almost preternatural confidence. Anna is standing somewhat separate from the group to talk to Lizzy, but she is still mostly caught up in the party.

ANNA: Hey, Lizzy, where are you? I thought you were gonna come over early.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - NIGHT

LIZZY: I'm at the hospital.

INT. ANNA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

[A handsome boy approaches Anna and wraps his arms around her midriff. She laughs but swats him away.]

ANNA: *(almost yelling)* Where? I can't - I totally can't hear you at all, Liz, you gotta speak up-

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - NIGHT

LIZZY: *(louder)* I said I'm at the hospital.

INT. ANNA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

ANNA: What? The hospital? Dude, why, what's wrong?

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - NIGHT

LIZZY: It's my grandma, she – she fell and hurt her hip pretty bad.

INT. ANNA'S HOUSE – NIGHT

ANNA: God, that sucks. I'm sorry.

LIZZY (V.O.): Yeah, thanks.

ANNA: But hey, why do you have to be there? Can't your parents handle it?

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY – NIGHT

LIZZY: (*hesitantly*) I don't – I don't know if that's –

INT. ANNA'S HOUSE – NIGHT

ANNA: Can't you just cut out? It's not like you're going to be able to do anything for her. C'mon, get your ass over here. Tim looks horny.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY – NIGHT

LIZZY: It's just – I mean, I rode with my dad, so.

ANNA (V.O.): Oh, okay. Well. Don't worry, I won't let him near any of the skanks.

LIZZY: Yeah, okay, thanks. (pause) Hey, Anna.

ANNA (V.O.): Yeah?

LIZZY: There's – I actually have something I – I need to talk to you –

INT. ANNA'S HOUSE – NIGHT

ANNA: (*more serious*) Liz? What is it -

[*Suddenly, across the room, a fight breaks out and quickly escalates.*]

ANNA: Oh, shit. Liz, I gotta go, these two guys are being total dicks, but – but we'll talk later, yeah? And hey, if you get done, it's not even -

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY – NIGHT

ANNA (V.O.): - that late yet, come over whenever.

LIZZY: Yeah, alright, I'll –

[*The line goes dead. After a moment, Lizzy shuts the phone almost angrily.*]

LIZZY: (*muttered, but loudly*) Goddamit.

[*She takes a moment to compose herself before turning back toward the hall bathroom. From down the hall, we see Alice poke her head out of the room and look around, spotting Lizzy.*]

ALICE: (*calling out*) Lizzy!

[*She gestures Lizzy toward the room and ducks back inside. Lizzy looks longingly at the bathroom door, but goes back to her grandmother's room, instead.*]

CUT TO: INT. HOSPITAL ROOM – NIGHT

Lizzy enters the room to see that Dr. Mathis is gone. Alice still stands over the bed, watching Gwen sleep. Phil is nowhere to be seen. Alice looks up at Lizzy and smiles.

ALICE: Good, you're back.

[She steps away from the bed and looks at Lizzy expectantly. Lizzy looks back, uncomprehending.]

ALICE: *(after a beat)* Well?

LIZZY: Well - ?

ALICE: Well, where's the coffee, bug?

LIZZY: *(flustered)* The – the coffee, right, I was just –

ALICE: Don't tell me you've been gone all this time and you still haven't gotten the coffee. What were you doing?

[She does not wait for an answer.]

ALICE: Nevermind, it's not important. Give me that change back, I'll go get it.

LIZZY: No, it's okay, I'll go, I –

ALICE: No, no, I need to get out of this room for a couple of minutes. Your dad went to stretch his legs a little. You mind sitting here with Grandma for a bit?

LIZZY: No, but –

She is interrupted by the appearance of MRS. CHISOLM, Gwen's elderly roommate, from behind the paper divider. Mrs. Chisolm shuffles slowly toward the in-suite bathroom, pushing an IV bag, smiling absently at Lizzy and Alice. Alice returns the smile. Mrs. Chisolm enters the bathroom and shuts the door, and Alice's attention returns to Lizzy.

ALICE: Don't leave, though, okay? If a nurse or a doctor comes by, you need to keep them here 'til I get back. Not your dad, okay, me. Now give me the change.

Lizzy digs in her pocket, pulls out the coins, and gives them to her mother. Alice smiles tiredly at Lizzy and presses a kiss to her forehead, regarding her for another second before leaving the room. Frustrated, Lizzy stares impotently around the room. In the background, a clock ticks loudly, several times.

CUT TO:

Lizzy, slumped in her chair yet again. The unopened bottle of water dangles from her fingers. She looks exhausted, mentally and physically – the events (and non-events) of the day have taken their toll. Through tired, almost desperate eyes, she takes in the door to the in-suite bathroom, still shut, then the door to the hallway, and finally rests her gaze on her sleeping grandmother. Abruptly, she stands and crosses to the doorway. She looks left and right – no sign of her parents. She looks again at her grandmother and sighs heavily, so wanting to leave, but unable to do so. Hesitantly, she approaches the closed in-suite bathroom door and knocks lightly, tentatively.

LIZZY: *(trying to sound concerned)* Excuse me? Um, are you – are you alright in there? Do I need to call someone for you?

MRS. CHISOLM (V.O.): Oh no, dear, I'm fine.

LIZZY: Are you sure? You've been in there a while.

MRS. CHISOLM (V.O.): No, it's just - just a little indigestion. Happens all the time at this age. You

sure are sweet to worry, but no, nothing to do but wait it out. *(helpfully)*

There's a bathroom down the hall if you need to go.

LIZZY: *(frustrated, but hiding it)* Oh, okay. Thank you, ma'am.

She exhales hard and returns to her chair. She spends a few seconds adjusting her position, trying to get comfortable, then gives it up and rolls her head back, staring up at the ceiling. Her eyes begin to well up with tears, which Lizzy attempts to rapidly blink away. She can't; they are coming too fast. She shuts her eyes tightly. Tears squeeze out and roll down the sides of her face. She wipes them away angrily.

CUT TO: INT. HOSPITAL ROOM – NIGHT

Alice enters the room, blowing on a very full cup of steaming-hot coffee. Her eyes immediately go to her mother, who is sleeping in her bed, before seeing Lizzy, also asleep, curled up awkwardly in her chair. Alice regards her daughter for a few seconds, reaching out to brush a few stray hairs off of Lizzy's face. Carefully, Alice pulls a cell phone out of her pants pocket and dials. We hear the phone RINGING on the other end of the line, then a slight noise as it is answered.

ALICE: *(still watching Lizzy)* Phil.

CUT TO: INT. LIZZY'S BEDROOM – MORNING

Lizzy is asleep on her bed, still wearing the clothes she was wearing the night before. She is on top of the covers, with the edge of the comforter folded back over her body. Bright morning light streams through her window, cutting across her face in thin shafts. She slowly blinks awake, sitting up and taking in her surroundings. She glances at her alarm clock. It reads 9:07 a.m. in glowing red numerals. She rubs her eyes and stretches a little, then freezes. She has remembered the previous day. She frantically feels into her jacket pocket for the test – it is still there. She heaves a sigh of relief. Through Lizzy's open door, we hear FOOTSTEPS coming up the stairway.

ALICE (O.S.): Lizzy? Lizzy, bug, I poured you some cereal, come quick or you won't have time to –

[Lizzy shoves the test back into her pocket just seconds before Alice appears in the doorway dressed in her Sunday best, her hair up in a bun.]

ALICE: Lizzy! What are you still doing in bed? Service starts in twenty minutes!

[She enters the room, opens Lizzy's closet, and starts digging through it, pulling out a dress and throwing it on Lizzy's bed.]

LIZZY: Why – why didn't you wake me up?

ALICE: I've been in here twice already, once when I got home from the hospital and again half an hour ago.

LIZZY: I don't remember that.

ALICE: You asked me for some cereal.

LIZZY: I – I don't remember.

ALICE: Well. You were pretty wiped out when you left last night.

LIZZY: I don't even remember leaving.

ALICE: No, you wouldn't, I don't think. You were conked out, I got your dad to take you home. *(pause)* Well, come on, don't just sit there, get dressed. Fifteen minutes.

[Lizzy gets out of bed and begins to change out of her dirty clothes, careful to keep her jacket near her.]

LIZZY: Why are we even going to church today? What about Grandma?

ALICE: They couldn't schedule her in for surgery before this afternoon. What shoes?

LIZZY: The black heels. With the – the strappy things. You don't want to be with her this morning?

[Alice pulls the appropriate shoes out of Lizzy's closet and hands them to her.]

ALICE: They have her on a lot of painkillers, hon. She won't even know we're there. And I've got the attendance pads today.

[Lizzy steps into her shoes.]

ALICE: Alright? Good. All ready, your dad's got the van cranked, let's go.

LIZZY: Wait, Mom, I just need to go to the bathroom real quick.

ALICE: No, Lizzy, we're gonna be late as it is –

LIZZY: It'll just take a second –

ALICE: You can wait 'til we get to church.

LIZZY: Mom –

ALICE: Lizzy, I don't want to hear it. It's your own fault that you slept late. It's a ten-minute drive. You can hold it. Now come on.

[Alice turns and exits the room. Helpless, Lizzy grabs her jacket and follows.]

CUT TO: EXT. FIRST CHRISTIAN BIBLE CHURCH – MORNING

A fairly small brick building, almost residential-looking, with raised white letters on the side reading "FIRST CHRISTIAN BIBLE CHURCH." The parking lot is nearly full. We can hear SINGING from inside the building – hymns.

CUT TO: INT. CHURCH LOBBY – MORNING

The lobby is small and mostly plain, but it has a large, beautiful stained-glass window of Jesus, arms outstretched. We can still hear hymns being sung. Alice nearly runs through the empty space. Phil and Lizzy trail her, Phil moving stiffly.

ALICE: Hurry, they've already started –

PHIL: I can't go any faster, Alice.

ALICE: I just don't want to come in during a prayer is all. It won't be so bad if we can come in during a song.

PHIL: Well, I'm coming.

They have reached a side door. Alice opens it slowly, trying to be quiet, and the three file in to the sanctuary.

CUT TO: INT. SANCTUARY – MORNING

The sanctuary isn't huge, but it is filled to the brim. Pew after pew is packed with people, all dressed in their Sunday best. Alice makes her way to a pew about midway through the sanctuary, squeezing in and making room for her and Phil. They immediately join in the hymn, not needing to look into the hymnal.

Lizzy hangs back, scanning the crowd, looking for someone. In the back row, she finally spots Anna, standing with a group of teenagers and singing along half-heartedly. Anna catches sight of Lizzy and breaks into a smile. She waves Lizzy over, but Lizzy shakes her head and gestures emphatically back toward the lobby. She slides back out the side door.

CUT TO: INT. CHURCH LOBBY – MORNING

Lizzy paces, gnawing on her thumbnail. From a door on the far side of the lobby, Anna enters and crosses to Lizzy, grinning.

ANNA: Playing hooky, Liz? Didn't know you had it in you. Come on, I want a cigarette.

[She begins to walk away. Lizzy catches her arm.]

LIZZY: No, wait –

ANNA: Don't worry, I won't even blow it in your direction –

LIZZY: Anna, wait, I need to tell you –

ANNA: I've got perfume in my purse, your parents will never know –

LIZZY: *(almost yelling)* Anna!

ANNA: Jesus, Lizzy! Someone's gonna hear us! What's wrong with you?

[Lizzy looks all around her, nervously checking the lobby for other people. Confused, Anna mimics her action.]

ANNA: Liz, what's – I don't get it, what's going on? You're kind of freaking me –

[Lizzy pulls the test out of her pocket and wordlessly pushes it into Anna's hand. Anna stares down at it, looks up at Lizzy, open-mouthed, then looks back down at the test.]

ANNA: – out. *(pause)* Jesus, Lizzy.

[She looks at it more closely.]

ANNA: It's blank. It's blank, have you – I mean, are you –

LIZZY: I don't – I mean, I haven't taken it yet, I don't. I don't know.

Colored light from the stained-glass window bathes them both in a glow as they stare at the test. Though neither girl speaks, we hear:

ANNA (V.O.): Lizzy.

CUT TO: INT. BATHROOM - MORNING

Lizzy's eyes snap open. She is in the church bathroom, still in the same position she



Krystal Tibbs, *20 Weeks*, oil on canvas

was in at the beginning of the film. We still hear HYMNS in the background, but a different one – a few minutes have passed.

ANNA (V.O.): Lizzy.

[In the mirror, we see Anna walk up behind her.]

ANNA: Time's up.

[Anna glances down to where the test lays face-down on the sink's counter.]

ANNA: *(determined)* Do you want to do it, or should - ?

Without ever once looking away from the mirror, Lizzy picks up the test and raises it to her eye-level. Her eyes flick to it. We don't see the reading, but her face says it all: positive. Behind her, Anna's eyes grow wide. She rests her forehead on Lizzy's shoulder.

ANNA: *(quietly)* Shit.

HORSEBACK RIDING IN AUGUST

by Lindsay Carter

I turned nine years old on a spotless day in late August, air so hot we thought it might catch fire as we caravanned out to *Boots and Saddles* horse-back riding ranch. Ten nine-year-olds watched a lanky man named Harry parade beautiful horses before us, their sun-spotted coats shiny copper. Harry wore a mustache shading a crooked smile— he taught me how to hold the reins in my hands.

My horse Bones was fat as a cow. Many years ago, Harry found Bones trapped on the side of the highway underneath a web of barbed-wire, his mangled skin barely stretched over bones— he was now lazy and spoiled with oats and easy boredom, but he was marvelous to me, like the sketch-book ponies I had often scrawled on the sidelines of my little brother's soccer games, or the characters in stories I wrote during class, mostly horses or cats, but really images of people I knew, or imagined I knew.

Harry propped each of the members of my birthday party onto horses. We sat still and uncertain in smooth saddles like candles not stuck quite far enough into a cake to stay upright. Harry led our procession of horses that grunted with complaints of heat and pointed children's heels jabbing into their sides, a constant buzzing of mosquitoes reminding all of us how immensely August it was. The horses stumbled over rocks and clumps of dried grass in the dusty path, curving around the bend of a murky chocolate lake.

The water must have beckoned Bones. He peeled off of the single-file line and clomped down the reedy bank to lap at the water. I called for help, but Harry couldn't hear me all the way at the front of the conveyor belt of wide nine-year-old eyes that watched me as they slid past. Bones lurched forward and carried me into syrupy dirt-water—I pulled back on the reins, but he just kept pumping further and further out into the lake. I screamed for Harry to notice me, my panicked eyes watering and French-braided hair splashed wet.

Harry finally stopped his horse and turned toward the lake, shouting at me to *get the horse out of the water*, his once-kind eyes black, his former smile forgotten. I shook the reins. I couldn't remember what I was supposed to do with them. Harry charged the water and met me in the middle of the lake, which had started to lick at my play-bruised knees. He lifted me from the saddle and plopped me astride his horse—we waded back to shore while Bones straggled behind. Harry gripped his bridle and snapped at Bones, at me, piercing the air with whipping words.



Mallory Ballant, *I Can't Lose Her*, ink wash and pen drawing

INSOMNIAC

by M.K. Foster

I am learning
to default to
the places in me
that I refuse
to admit to myself,
wanting, deep,
like the dull echo
of a butter
pat dropped
in a cold, flat pan.
It is 3:46 in the
black morning,

and I should be
asleep, like the
cat on my lap,
like the demon
at my back.
I should be
productive.

(Or what
society tells me
productive is):

I should be
reading, about
the Zimmerman
Note, writing
down ideas about
post-modern sex.
I should be
smoking a fine
white cigarette,
but I cannot
(for the life of me)
find a lighter.

A documentary
on the womb flickers
across a dusty room.

I am no expert
on love or war,
on cat care, or
motherhood,
and more than
anything in life I
want to be the World
War authority of the
age, breathing out
cinnamon clouds.
And I suppose,
it's not enough:
to wish the boy,
stoned, two floors
below would find
bright enlightenment
in the back of my eyes
and make love to me,
to wonder who

the cathode shadow
people are
floating behind
a diagram of
the amniotic sac.
I suppose
it's not enough
to pray that
I will wake up
where you are.

It never will be,
nor should it.

So for now,
I will push
forward
to forget
the places in me
that I accept
about myself,
subsisting,
still, like water
in the road
after rain,
trying to live
with Now,
to breathe in
shadows, to
decide what
to do with the
pink quickening
at the window
and with the angel,
dead beneath my bed.



Katie Adams, *Andreades*, photography

JOHNATHON

AND I

by Meg
Lundberg

Johnathon's gravestone says "1987" right next to the engraving of his face. I didn't know him, but I visit him so often that his face has become my own brother's face. Johnathon should be twenty-two, but his twelve-year-old body decays in the ground beneath my bare feet. The year I was born, he died.

Angel figurines litter his grave. Their unblinking eyes stare out from serene-painted faces. They comfort Johnathon's family, but I don't like them. I bring him a gift: a small, slightly melted mushroom candle I stole from my older sister's room. It swirls the seven colors of the rainbow.

I set Johnathon's new present among the bug-eyed angels and pull my last Reese's Cup out of its wrapper. I break it in half stuffing one piece in my mouth and placing the other on the tombstone just below the engraving of Johnathon's smiling face. I skip out of the cemetery gates back down the street to my house, licking melted chocolate from my hands.



Ian Moore, *Untitled*, oil on canvas

WOLLOF

by Sarah McCune

Redael briskly turns the corner
chest heaving,
pumping arms,
feet weary from the corporate climb.
The mountain squeaking,
rickety from rust.
Feet trembling, nearing the summit.
Brisk air
blowing ice crystals.
The face, bare and rosy red
burn as the liquid solidifies.
Tears freezing in retracted pupils.
Welts of briefcases
cover the bony cheeks.
Childhood games of copy cat
mimicking mechanical mannerisms.
Trekking up the crumbling mountain,
chunks of softened dirt,
melt beneath the feet.
Releasing computers, food, paper shredders.
Tumbling to the base,
at a stifled rate,
relinquishing Emerson's cloud of self-reliance.
Black suits, shined leather shoes,
stereotypical blue and red ties,
slowing circulation to the brain,
a sense of suffocation.
Passing the Starbuck's black
around the maple conference table,
conveniently suspended in the heavens,
above unsuspecting civilians.

R E Q U I E M



Ian Moore, *Untitled*, oil on canvas

by M.K. Foster

My old man was a window washer for the City Federal building for thirty-two years. Every day of my god-forsaken childhood, it was the same: him up before the light, riding that damn stationary bike of his. You see, he had this heart problem, and it's not like he could take anything more than .68 miles to nowhere, something he should have thought through given his line of work. And after that bike, he'd shower, take a cold shower. That's something else that

was always the same with him, us kids always came first, and hot water was no exception. He dressed each day in this beach-white cotton undershirt, carhart work pants, and his signature khaki button up. Over his neck, he always slid this gold-chained cross necklace with a little splayed silver Jesus on it. I could never figure out why he wore that thing, seeing as how, from the looks of it, God had given him the shaft on life. No kid grows up praying to spend his days hanging

125 feet above the solid ground of 24th Avenue S, smelling like crusted sweat and Windex. Still, I never had the spine to ask him. Something about questioning God made me uneasy. I'll never forget being a kid and having the Jesus scared out of me on mornings when I wasn't quite awake. I'd be stumbling out of bed, aching for a leak, slapping a sleep sweaty palm against the walls to find my way, and he would just come out of nowhere. I swear to you, it was like one of those Eastwood flicks, his deep raspy voice just spiraling out of the darkness, asking questions he already knew the answers to, breathing through clogged nasal passages. I'd nearly pissed my pants right there, froggy pajamas getting damp between my legs, and then, I'd see him. He liked to put on his argyle socks and work boots sitting on the top stair of our staircase, one cramping carharted calf strained up over a thick thigh. He insisted on argyle, said it gave him at least a little pride in what he was doing to know he was wearing the same socks the people in the City Federal building were wearing, said it helped him keep his bearings. At the time, I wasn't so sure about making socks the gravity of my life, but then again, it was his life.

And it killed him, that life, that job. He kicked the bucket just shy of fifty-two, had a massive heart attack in the harness they put him in to wash those damn windows. For five hours, he hung there in front of the windows between the 10th and 11th floors. It wasn't until some arrogant business bastard started to complain that the bird shit hadn't been cleaned off his window that they actually

found him. I was only eighteen at the time, tall as a dill weed and skinny as hell. The new suit my mom bought for me to wear to his funeral was too big and hung off me like a damn rail, sleeves sliding over my hands, cuff links unhinging, trousers dragging. She said I looked like my dad and straightened my polyester tie. Later on, after we got him in the ground and all the old ladies had gone home, I burned that tie.

I kept the suit though, and after putting myself through four god-awful years of hoity-toity university, I got myself a white-collar job selling Cadillacs to the Nuevo-Riche. And I got to admit, I was pretty damn good at it. I mean, all I really had to do was talk three out of every five tire-kickers into the latest model plus cup-holders in Midnight Escape, and they cut me a paycheck that covered a joint to live in and all the Spaghetti-O's I could eat. The only thing about this job was that, after a while, talking to a bunch of two-speed igmo's all frickin' day long about fuel economy got old. You'd go round and round with Aunt Bea over the logistics of RPM's and she'd turn around and ask you, young man, just how you "switch it on." I mean, at that point, half your day'd be gone, and given you couldn't slam a twit's head in the car door, there was nothing left to do but go on lunch break and get a tuna salad sandwich out of the office vending machine. The way I figured it, after about six months of working for that place, the only difference between my lot and my old man's was that instead of working a dead-end job and smelling like a giant squeegee,

I smelled like oiled leather and the sharp funk of burnt coffee in Styrofoam cuppies.

So, I quit. You see, employees weren't allowed to piss in the first-floor bathrooms. This was especially a pain for us sales guys. You'd be right in the middle of telling a prick in a sweater vest about tire pressure, and nature would call. It was like walking through all seven rings of hell making the trek to the second-floor closet of a bathroom. Let no one tell you otherwise, a man's bathroom is his kingdom. Take away his mother and his dog, if you like, but leave him his bathroom. To add insult to injury, the penalty for using it was getting sent home for the day. Imagine that, your wife or girlfriend finds your stumbling through the door in the middle of the day, and when she asks you why, all you can say is, "I had to pee." Anyway, quitting was easy enough—just peed in the first-floor bathroom and never went back—but the hard part was knowing what to do next.

I became the oldest kitchen boy working at the Daylight Donuts on 17th Street N. After flipping through the classifieds for a couple days and going through my entire stash of Spaghetti-O's, I walked the two blocks from my apartment to Daylight and filled out their flimsy carbon work application. I could've cared less about the difference between cake-style and crullers, but in my estimation, smelling like hot glaze on wax paper at the end of the day couldn't be half bad. The guy that owned it hired me on the spot, saying

anybody who wore dress shoes could definitely make donuts. He gave me a bad vibe, if you know what I mean. He was about forty and looked like the kind of jerk I used to sell cars to, his imp-jawed face and wire-rim glasses causing me to do a double-take outside to make sure a new Cadillac in Midnight Escape wasn't parked out front on the curb with the meter jammed and an empty coffee cup in the cup holder.

He drove this busted Mercedes a whole three blocks to work every day,

*Let no one tell you otherwise,
a man's bathroom is his
kingdom.*

the jerk, but working for him was kind of nice. My first six weeks of donut making at Daylight were definitely what those philosophers would call a "charmed life." I mean, making a donut is not rocket science, all crank, fry, and flip, so most of the time, I just stared through the back window at the blonde next door, trying to figure out what I would say if I ever met her and to determine whether or not her rack was real. And sure, I had to give up the solo rights to my apartment. Half my space went to a dweeb that managed the men's shoe department at a Macy's store and trimmed his thick, overgrown nose-hair

with a special pair of silver grooming scissors. He had this nasty habit of leaving little black trimmings all in the sink, but since I got all the bear claws I wanted and always smelled like the crusty oiled crumbs of deep-fried dough, I figured it was an even trade of existence.

The donut industry wasn't without its thorns. Every so often, I'd scald a wrist with frying oil or the jerk would start breathing down my neck about my shirt being un-tucked, but still, it didn't matter. Unlike the car job or that of my old man, with this gig, there was always a chance of promotion to something a bit bigger. For all I knew, the jerk could die tomorrow when the brakes of that busted Mercedes finally give, and I could be the new manager of Daylight Donuts. That was something my old man could never say.

So, I'd been working my can off there long enough to figure out the girl next-door was a 34-C and to start getting sick of the bear claws, when these two big guys walked in. They were both old-looking, with thinning salt-and-pepper hair and wrinkles like Einstein. Under normal circumstances, I would have ignored them and continued doing whatever measly task I was up to, but one of them looked a hell of a lot like my old man. I nearly jumped out of my skull when I looked up at the sound of the store's doorbell. For a minute there, it looked as if the old man had been lying to us all this time, faking his death and holding out in hiding from my mother. I mean, it's not like I would have blamed

him if he did. They had a pretty good relationship all my life, but I'm not lying when I say that Satan himself would have walked my mother to the gates of hell and asked her to leave. She was the kind of woman who thought frozen vegetables could never expire and recycled bread bags until the bakeries' names were indistinguishable. As a result, I ate brown-slimed baby peas for most of my childhood and was beaten unmercifully if I failed to bring home my bread bag lunch sack from school every day. This partly explains why, to this day I neither eat vegetables nor buy bread in a bag.

Anyway, it took me a minute not to walk over there and slug the guy for ever making me put on the goddamn suit and polyester tie. Then, I realized that it was just another coot in a double-XL parka out pretending to exercise, but really getting his donut fix. This fact established, I turned around and went back to cranking the dough cutter for the original glazers. I wasn't good with customers and always managed to drop their orders on the floor, between the counter tops, or give them a weird look because I knew that I had been hung-over when I fried the particular batch they were buying from. Customers, however, were the jerk's specialty. He'd sweep out of nowhere in his ironed, over-tucked work shirt, smiling like a damn Cheshire cat. Just overhearing his bull about the Daily Super Special made me nauseous, so whenever a customer came in, I headed for the back room to pick off the jerk's lunch and see if there were an important

memos on his desk. For some reason, today was different. Something about the semblance of my old man gave me the urge to stick around, to watch what happened.

The two guys were eyeing the first counter, the one with the sprinkled garbage and the cinnamon crap in it, so I took a post puttering around with the coffee maker. I couldn't have worked that damn thing if my life depended on it, but it was the best place to see what was going down and to be seen working hard. I pulled out the filter basket and started to stir up the old grounds with a swizzle stick, right as the jerk launched into his spiel about how today if they bought two half-dozens they would only pay the price of a baker's.

The swizzle stick I was using crunched in half, and I burned my fingers. The fat guys didn't want to hear it, the one like my old man eyeing the cinnamon rolls and his friend the sprinkled glazers. It never ceases to amaze me how we men give busty women and gleaming food the same look, glassy and unflinching, like a baby doll's eyes. This one gal I went out with one time accused me of kissing her goodnight the same way I ate steak. I never saw her again, but after that night, I always ate chicken on dinner dates.

So the friend eventually decided that he wanted a dozen sprinkled and a baggie of donut holes, and for a minute there, my gag reflex nearly got the better of me because watching the jerk

fill his order was like watching a musk oxen inheat on one of those nature shows, dancing around between the counters to pull out a box and wax paper, making all kinds of ungodly appetite noises. I looked away and reasserted my energies on the coffee grounds when he finally set the order on the counter and sucked the fiver out of the friend's chubby fist. The guy that looked like my old man was a different story. He wanted cinnamon rolls, but not just one: he wanted the whole damn tray. I thought the jerks eyes were going to bug out of his scrawny impish head when he heard this. "The whole tray?" he mewed. The guy nodded and shifted the weight of his frame from one blown-hip to the other, a movement characteristic of my old man, especially if he was pissed with me about something. "You can't do that. What if someone else wants to buy one?"

I nearly fell out, dropping steaming grounds on my dress shoes. If it wasn't the yellowed scum of a city window getting you down or the grit of tire grease giving you grief, it was a little balding donut-picking puke telling you that you weren't allowed to buy his crappy cinnamon rolls. The guy that looked like my old man just turned and tottered out without a word, also something that my father would do. His friend shrugged and followed his lead gait down the street. The jerk, flustered and surging in the chaos of a blown power trip, just smoothed that over-tucked shirt of his, straightened his already straight wire-rim glasses, and

headed for the back room to eat his untouched lunch. In this moment of clarity, I saw opportunity. I jammed that coffee maker so the jerk would be drinking dirty water for weeks, then I emptied the whole damn tray of cinnamon rolls into a paper carry-out sack. And after taking off my batter-gunked apron, strolling out the door with an oily bag of cinnamon rolls under my arm, I never set foot back in that joint again.

That day it occurred to me that in the great rat race of life, someone was always going to be moving the cheese. It doesn't make a double-headed dime's worth of difference whether you're a damn Rockefeller or a stinking bum who gets coins for turning in tin cans. Regardless of timecard or title, at their pithy cores, all jobs are created equal, and every poor shmuck's gotta get one. So, I figured, as long as I was in a business I could respect, at least a little, and could respect me, just maybe, I might be able to have something to show for myself after elbowing my way through this life. My old man had his, and now, I have mine.

And that's how I can rule the argyle sock universe.

*...someone was
always
going to be
moving
the cheese*

BECOMING AN

Denial

Walking past the faded oak gazebo outside Edgewood Academy, I admire the pear tree's young leaves, the equitable warmth encasing me, and the vast ozone palm above. I swing my tidy, plastic lunchbox back and forth by its strap. Even the swamp lilies bloom white in the ditch beside the football field. I meditate on distance, the sun and stars, and decide to give God the benefit of the doubt.

Anger

Mr. Fisher doesn't notice the specks of spit his mouth jettisons during his tirade on the Catholic Church. Spencer Coleman relaxes since class avoids chemistry. Forehead bulging, our teacher laments Galileo and prison; the Inquisition set us back so far, he says in a voice reserved for Principal Pickett. I don't think Fisher can relax after Vietnam. He leaves school on a bawling, black motorcycle.

Bargaining

In fifth grade homeroom, Mrs. Cleveland tries to ferret out a doubter amongst us with a snowflake object lesson: each is pretty and unique, each and every one of them. God loves us. That night,

ATHEIST

by Clark Weber

I kneel beside my red double bunk bed and ask
God to bulwark Mom's flight. She comes home,
but I worry I pester Him. When Mrs. Coker,
the old, frilly-haired Christian, asks me if I pray,
I tell her I'm saving up for a big one.

Depression

I seek Dad for guidance, imagining he can pass
along belief like teams: the Maple Leafs,
the Packers, the Twins. I corner him on the onyx leather
couch in the living room, and even though I
snicker inside at his gay vest and Indiana
Jones hat, I want to know his answer. Dad's eyes mist up
but not in the good way, like when he talks
about the Gray Ghost, Tony Canadeo. He says religion
discloses to us when we are alone.

Acceptance

My faith dwells with the stand of loblolly pines
planted by Grandma Lucia in meticulous rows
south of Daleville. No dump trucks full of nitrogen
fertilizer or canisters spraying Garlon-4
trespass on this sandy soil. Grandma drives me
out there and claws the ground with her hands,
holds the yellow dirt to my face before flinging it across
the property line. It took her two decades to admit to those
hundreds of stunted, scraggly trees.

MAGGIE

SUNDOWNING

by Clark Weber

I decide to pick blueberries in the dead of night while my son, his wife, and the grandkids sleep in the cottage. Through a window, the cool, summer breeze ruffles my piano-wire hair. I rummage for a herring-bone, black-white mink coat and slip it over my pale muumuu and thin shoulders. I wore this to “A Little Night Music” in Mobile when Kim and Marcia dated. I can’t refuse my solitaire, ruby ring hiding in the bedside dresser.

I creep barefoot down the hall, past the Formica horseshoe counter kitchen, thinking berries will go great on a layer cake with lemon butter topping. I would have baked something yesterday, but Kim forgot to call and remind me of their visit. Marcia gaped at my fridge, tacked with bass photos from the sixties and empty except for cottage cheese, lettuce, and a bottle of Bordeaux. How could I prepare? Tomorrow, dessert will please them,

but the berries must come first. I tip-toe down the porch steps and bathe in moonlight reflecting from Lake Tamarack. The lonesome moans of loons haunt me as I stroll along the shore. When the bank steepens, I wade into Nothing Bay, skirting along the lily pads, uprooting silt, ignoring gills that slap the backs of my calves. Across the lake, I reach the old farmhouse, white paint stripped, where Jim and I raised children. I wonder when



Jim died, but the berry patch west of the house doesn't answer this or why I am here. I remember hunger now and search the bushes to gobble what the black bears have left me. Mamma and Poppa taught me how to cup a bunch and then roll them off the stem gently. Some of what crams my mouth squirms and pricks my tongue, but I chew it all to mush and suck the juice from my thumb. The rest I stuff, dripping, into my coat pockets.

I don't worry about home until the old farmhouse door croaks open to the gutted interior, cold and bewildering. Only the kingfisher watches me panic. The water steals my ring as I grope the embankment, hugging the lake's edge. The half moon has sunk when I discover the cottage and wander into my room. I shove my coat back in the closet before the grandkids come to wake me because beetles scuttle out of the mink like suspicions.



Katie Adams, *Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock*, photography

BACKYARD IN **CENTER**POINT, ALABAMA

by Leah Hermes

Out of the matted, soggy earth sprouts
a hunk of meal painted
ivory, carnation pink, cobalt, lightened
as if doused in turpentine.

Two chain-link ropes dangle
from the topmost bar, connected by
a slab of white perforated plastic. When
the swing is vacant, it floats like
hydrangea petals in the meandering breeze.



Robin Barnett, *Sticks*, medium format film



Robin Barnett, *Hermanita*, medium format film

Today, the swing is occupied.
Marie propels herself forward,
blue-jeaned legs pumping, urging
the swing higher. The rusted chains
rub together, squeaking, disturbing the
squirrels from the red mulberry trees
suspended over the swingset.

Marie's nutmeg hair flutters behind
Her, colliding against her skin.
She doesn't notice in her hop-skip-jump
daydreams the bee hovering near
her shoelaces or the weight of her body
pitching the swing set's brittle bones.
A curious beetle climbs a dandelion nearby,
stands sentinel over the scene.

Chartreuse and forest green kudzu
curls around the swing set's metal stems.
It fuses, intertwining leaf
for leaf, sewing a plant
bed beneath Marie's thrusting feet.
The beetle scurries from his watchtower.

Marie arches her back and loosens
her grip on the chains, flinging
herself from the swing into the kudzu
trap. She lands, ankles arguing.
The heap of kudzu swathes her shoes,
coils up her legs.
It swallows her whole.

COLLEGE: **NOSTALGIA** FOR SEVEN-YEAR-OLDS

by Sara Dupre

Scarce scattered snow chunks still linger
Like a shivering child clutching his arms to his torso,
Remnants of a time when we were virgins,
Before the devil raped us, and
Before we raped each other.

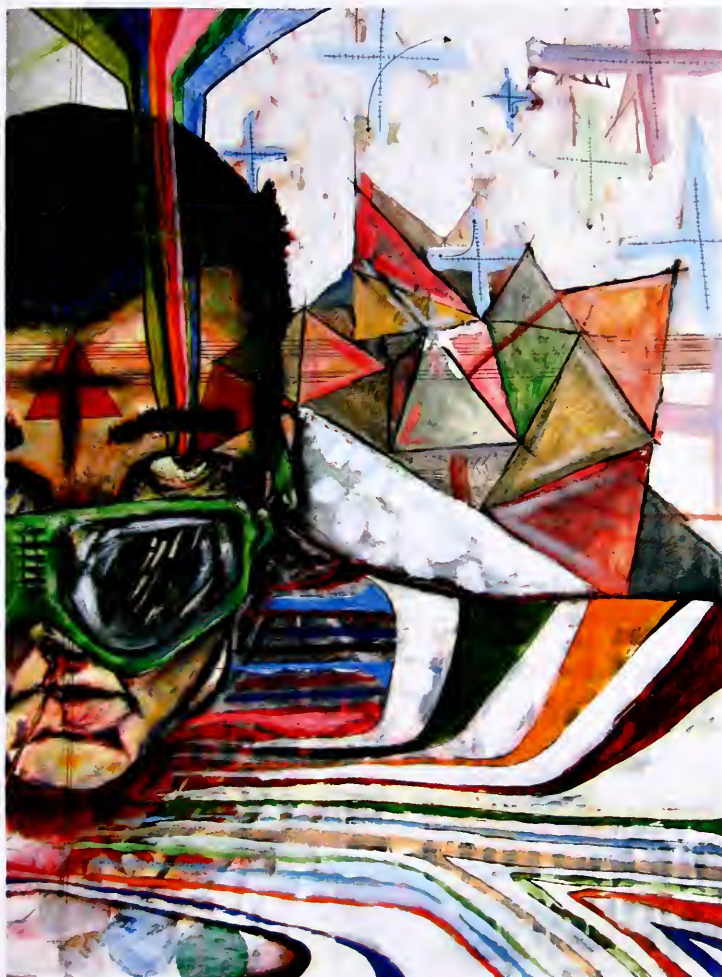
She can now strip down to one layer
Clinging to her curvature,
A language of singular costume intents,
Denying its skin through its bones.
Her stiletto heels strut wood clunks across the wet concrete,
Then penetrate the moist dirt, burying gasping green blades
Below the breeze and daylight.
I bet she forgot when

The prickly cold compelled her to run
For warmth, to
Skip stomp slide slurp up
Snow angels and fly
Through white cloud giggles,
When immobility was sticky and
Daddy crowned King! and
The snowman guarded the tree house castle
Where she battled in neighborhood snow wars
Catapulting ice bombs at
Seven year olds whose echoes now

Drown in melt and rhythmic sex stomps.
She limits laughter to one precise syllable
Uttered with her chin cocked up one inch
Then snapped back to parallel pose.

You never know what she's thinking anymore, but
She breathes easier today,
In the face of Sunday's snow dying,
As do I.

We carry a today of condoms and terrorists,
A fence with a "Beware of Dog" sign,
Though we don't own a dog.



Ian Whitley, *Nick Crovo's Mind*, mixed media

THE DAY I MET THE DEVIL

by
Grant Swanson

Victor Thompson, *Untitled*, mixed media



I rose from bed drunkenly after a phone call from my secretary, Ava, outlining the few details of another grisly murder. The third this month with the same M.O: The victims were found bound and gagged, their bodies grotesquely mutilated. The few hours of restlessly tossing and turning in my bed would have to suffice. Whiskey fogging my mind, I grabbed my coat and left for the office.

Ava was ready with a cup of strong coffee, God bless her. She briefed me again, thankfully, because in my impaired state a few details could well have been lost on the drive over.

"There are some real sick people in this world, Chief."

Ava flipped her long blonde hair out of her stunning blue eyes. I gave her the job not only because she was the best and most loyal aide I had found in a while (not

to mention the brightest), but also because her slight 5'4" frame was a welcome sight to my tired eyes.

"Serial killers don't think like normal johns. They're cut from a different cloth. I feel like shit."

"You look like shit. Want me to roll you a cigarette?"

"Yes, darlin." I took a swig of my coffee. "I have a headache that would kill a lesser man."

"Maybe if you took it easy on the sauce you'd have less of these rough mornings," she said dryly.

"Hey now, little missy. I pay you for your hips, not your lips. Roll it up."

"You jerk!" She smiled at me with those sparkling veneers.

Ava walked over to her desk and opened the tobacco box. She quickly rolled the tobacco into a tight cone, placed it in between pouty, pink-glossed lips, and set a match to



the end.

She put the cigarette in my mouth and sat on my lap. She put her arms around my neck and looked at me with those eyes, those damned eyes.

"So what do you think these murders have in common?"

"If I knew, I'd already be gettin' paid, sweetheart," I said, taking the acrid smoke into my lungs. "'The Angel of Death', the media's callin' him. Sounds like a heavy metal band. Or a serial killer wanting some publicity."

"You think so? Gosh, Chief, that's scary."

***"Hey now, little missy.
I pay you for your
hips, not your lips."***

Oh Ava, you're too innocent for this line of work, I thought, but the words never left my lips. This girl had a good front, but behind those eyes was a mind that knew so much already. Ava had a rough past, that much I could gather, and I knew she could do the job better than anyone. "Well, give me the names of the departed. I'll see if I can find something in Archives to try to connect these murders."

"Sergeant Reilly wants to see you in his office."

"That prick? Jesus this just keeps getting better, doesn't it?"

"Just relax, Chief. If you don't ruffle his feathers, he won't have any reason to suspend you. Especially if you crack this case." She handed me a list with three names jotted down. "Here's your victim list, my liege." She winked at me with those baby blues as I took another drag of my cigarette.

"Thanks babe. Don't work too hard."

I headed out the door of my office and down the hall to Sergeant Reilly. His rugged features betrayed a look of disgust as his watery black eyes squinted at me through the jungle that was his eyebrows.

"Detective Sharp! Nice of you to finally get here! Sit down." Small talk is fun with Reilly. I wonder how his bedside manner is.

"Thanks, Sarge, I'll stand. Gotta stretch the ol' legs out."

"Smart ass. Why the hell we keep you around is beyond me. You kill more criminals than you put in jail."

"I didn't come here for you to tell me how to do my job. Let me get the files on that Angel freak."

He curled his mustachioed lips back in a snarl and went to the file cabinet. He slapped a manila folder on his desk between us.

"That's everything we have on the

Angel. Now go do some damn work, Detective.”

“Thanks Sarge. That wasn’t so bad, now was it?”

“Get the hell out of my office. God forbid I have to listen to your damn lip for much longer.”

John Drake, Phillip Moore, and Frank Wallace. I went to Archives and found nothing. Hours of searching were fruitless. Apart from a shared past of petty crime, the men were clean. The petty crimes were committed in different states, so even those weren’t any connection. I rubbed the faint edges of sleep out of my eyes. I looked into a window at my faint reflection and realized Ava was right. I did look like shit. My three-day beard was shrouding my jaw and neck, and dirty blond hair hung down over my face. I swept it back with an absent hand and sat in consternation at my inability to connect these men.

I walked down the hall to the Atrium heading out the double doors into the bright sunshine. My eyes squinted against the glare as I got on my Yamaha R-6. I’m still young enough to look good on a bike, so I don’t get rid of it. In my opinion, I think it should be required for cops to have cool personal cars. I make the engine scream as I head down the interstate to the hospital, hoping that the victims might have some common ground amongst their personal effects.

A young, nervous intern with a large pair of eyeglasses let me into the morgue. The two most recent bodies were still here, the first having been earlier this month and quickly buried. I checked the names: Moore and Wallace. The bodies were almost unrecognizable, they were so fiercely

battered. I saw where their bones were shattered in several places and their skin cut deep and uniform, as if by a razor blade.

“Do the bodies match up in general?”

“Almost perfectly, sir. The injuries were all performed with exact precision and the killing strike was the jugular serration.”

“So he inflicted as much pain as possible on these guys and then just bled them?”

“Exactly. It seems our friend either wants to send a message, or just enjoys killing. Or both.” The intern went over to a large lockbox and opened it.

“Here is the two men’s personal property. A couple of wallets, watches of expensive make. Oh, and here’s something interesting. Both men were wearing identical silver pendants. The words ‘Vicious Lies’ appears on one side and on the other it says ‘To the End of Growth and Development.’ Mean anything to you?”

I took one of the pendants and looked it over. It was nice, definitely custom-made for some reason. “To the End of Growth and Development.” I wondered how it fit. “I don’t know yet. My friends are good with this sort of thing. Finding things out. Do you mind if I take a look at the wallet contents?”

“Be my guest. I have some paperwork to fill out so just let the attendant know when you’re finished in here.” The young intern walked out, leaving me to piece together some coherent link in this jumbled mess. The wallets had innocuous things in them, credit cards, driver’s licenses, and several business cards. They all dealt with supply companies and cross country shipping. I noticed that the men had their names on cards for a distributing company called Drake, Moore, Wallace and Steele.

“So all of these men worked for the same company. But who is this Steele guy?”

I thought a visit to the business district may

very well be in order. My friends are the kind of people that know everything to do with the city of Atlanta. Time to pay them a visit.

I walked along the sidewalk of a dark lonely street, looking sidelong at the bums crowded around oil drums burning like funeral pyres into the night. I spit the loose tobacco from the end of my cigarette onto the cold concrete. December is the worst month for Atlanta, the squalor of the streets painfully obvious. I faintly remember a time when I lived among the dregs of society. Such a life gave me the company of the very people I was going to meet. These urchins were my people, and now instead of joining them on the losing side of the law, I was enforcing the imprisonment of them and their families. Sometimes it was easy for them to forget that fact. Sometimes they reminded me. And at other times I was the one who did the reminding. A good pistol whipping can loosen up tight lips. I snuffed my cigarette out, took a swig from my flask full of Jack, and stepped out of the cold into Hank's Pawn.

*...oil drums burning
like funeral pyres
into the night*

Hank was a skinny bastard who did "hard," and his lined face of only 32 years betrayed his addiction. He looked up from a tray of Rolexes a young punk was trying to unload on him to meet my eyes.

"Well goddamn! If it ain't ol' G-Money hisself! Wass good, partna?" Hank's grin exposed rotted teeth.

"Same ol' shit, Hank. I need a little help with somethin' I got goin' on. Got a few

corpses that had some moving business with each other. Check some names for me, would you?" I slipped a sealed folder with the names, descriptions, and necessary information under the small space beneath the wire mesh enforced glass.

"You gotta pay to play, bruh. You know knowledge ain't cheap in this neighborhood." He chewed on a toothpick he grabbed from a dirty cup and stared expectantly through the bulletproof glass.

"You know, you should be more eager to help me, seein' as I'm an officer of the law nowdays." I grinned as I slipped a couple of C-notes his way. "Most of this shit in here is worthless, but I'm sure enough of it is stolen to give you a few years, brother."

"Don't gimme that shit, G. You jus' as dirty as me." He smiled again, so I assumed he knew I was just kidding. Hank was far too valuable to indict, and he and I went back—back to a time when my gang was my life and all I knew was the money. But I grew past that, and Hank stayed a part of it all.

"Somebody dead these fools in old buildings? That's a red flag right there, dawg. Check the building codes for connections with the new safety codes. He might be killin' these cats in buildings not set to be retrofitted. Harder to find." He rustled through the folder and pulled out the pendant.

"Oh shit! I know what this is! Boys in the Vice Lords gives these things to they top players. These boys in your morgue are down."

"I figured as much. 'Vicious Lies.' Vice Lords. While you look into all that, find out who that fourth person in their partnership is. Steele."

"Aight, partna, that's a bet. Be safe out there little brother."

"You should tell that to the people I'm

after.”

And as quickly as I came, I exited into the cold darkness.

I turned a corner, thinking the case over from every angle. I knew that the connection was at the tips of my fingers. It was only a matter of chasing down the few random leads I had. I looked around, noting that my deep thoughts had taken me to a part of town where I knew no friends. The night air tasted electric, like it does before it rains. I looked up into the sky, noting the stars shining clearly against a black canvas. No clouds. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, in anticipation for whatever ill fate my paranoid suspicions might bring.

I stopped at a gas station and picked up a cup of coffee-flavored water. It's pathetic the swill they try to pass off in these places. I slapped a fiver onto the counter and pointed at a pack of Reds on the wall behind the old Arab man at the register. Rolling my own cigarettes is my method of choice, but as ragged as I felt, even that relatively simple task would probably prove too difficult.

As I walked out, I glanced down the street. A Lincoln with tinted windows switched its lights on as the engine revved to life. I remembered enough about the old days to know that they had been waiting for me, staying one corner behind so I couldn't make them out. In a split second, I felt my heart rate quicken. In my heightened state of awareness I could almost hear the click of the transmission as the car shifted into gear. A second later, I was off and running, my coffee spilt like the blood of a fallen soldier into the cracks of the pavement. Behind me, I heard the squeal of tires on asphalt as the town car took off after me. My eyes were darting in every direction as I ran, looking for cover in case these thugs decided to skin their pistols and throw some

heat my way. I ducked into the shrouded darkness of a side alley as the Lincoln took off down the street I had been on.

“Gotta find a way out, there's *always* a way out,” I muttered to myself breathlessly. “Don't lose your head, Greg. Survive.”

I scaled a chain link fence midway down the alley, thinking how similar my current situation seemed to a TV crime drama. That thought left my head as quickly as it had come. My feet pounded the broken concrete of the dark breezeway as I bolted for the next street.

“Why the fuck am I stuck without a ride in this goddamn ghetto?” I thought of my bike parked seven blocks away at my old friend Mad Matt's apartment. What I would have given to have it sitting on the street I was sprinting to.

As I ran gung-ho onto the avenue, the car spun around the corner to my right. The tinted windows slid down on each of the passengers' doors. Three shiny 9mm pistols gleamed from the interior of the luxury car. My breath caught in my chest as I bolted for a set of stairs leading to a sublevel bar. The sign read “Vortex.” If I could only reach the stairs before—

I heard the sharp report of gunfire. It seemed like minutes passed before I felt the first slug clip my right leg, followed by a second in my side. I tripped and flew headlong down the stairs, landing in a crumpled heap at the bottom. My mind knew only pain, the wounds burning white hot. I smelled my flesh burning, and I had to fight to keep from yelling, fainting, and throwing up all at once. I heard the gangsters yell as the Lincoln sped off.

“You better drop dis shit before we come through again an' murk yo' ass! 2-7-4, get right!”

The door opened to the bar and an old black man looked down at me. He was that kind of old strength—strength earned through

years of hard work. I imagined this bar was the fruit of his labor.

"Damn, boy, you alright? I heard dem gumshots and was scared fo' my customers. Looks like it's you dey was after. Lemme get you inside an' get you fixed up, son."

He lifted me easily and took me through the bar to the employee dressing room. The bar was slow, it being so late, or early, or whatever it was at the time. My head was so wrapped around everything that had happened that time was a stranger to me.

"What you do to make dem boys pop off like dat?" He spoke in the broken vernacular that is the trademark of Atlanta natives. Most of my friends growing up had the same distinctive drawl, a mix of Southern accent and urban slang.

"Well," I winced as he put pressure on my bleeding wounds, "I expect they're not too happy with my line of work. I'm a cop. A dick for the Sherriff's Department of the Greater Atlanta district. And judging by the numbers they shouted at me and their general disregard for human life, I'd say they're in a gang. And one that isn't too thrilled with the case I've been assigned to. But that's more than I can really say."

"How you reckon they's in a gang? What you know 'bout all that nasty business?"

"A lot, I should think. I used to be in one."

The old man looked at me over his glasses with a glare that said, "Yeah? Well you ain't the only one."

"Now how does a smart, sharp-lookin' young man like you git mixed up in that bull?"

I tested to see if my right leg could hold my weight. It hurt like hell, but I'd taken worse punishment. The bullets had gone straight through.

"That's digging up my past, something I'm not used to doing with strangers. Sorry," I added quickly, not wanting to seem too

standoffish. This man had just saved me a lot of grief.

"Heh heh, don't sweat it, young brotha," he said as he washed his hands in the sink. "Let's go grab a shot a' rye an' you can relax for a bit. Those gangbangin' sons-a-bitches don't fuck with my bar." He pulled a .357 Magnum out of his waistband. "Not when ol' girl right here is on duty." He tucked it back into his dirty jeans and winked.

I threw back three shots of strong Tennessee whiskey before the throbbing pain began to subside. I slapped a ten on the counter.

"No, no, little brotha," the owner smiled. "Those were prescriptions for them gaps you got in yo' skin."

"Take it. It's not much, but you did me a solid."

"It's just common decency. God knows this city could use more of it. If you gonna pay me, order somethin' else."

I liked this guy. He spoke my language fluently.

"Give me a shot of 151, with a beer back."

He poured a double shot for each of us, and we clinked our glasses together. We shared identical looks of agony as the firewater burned its way down.

"So what kinda case you involved in, if you don't mind my askin'? It's a habit to want to know wass good in the streets."

I took a pull from my beer. "It's a damn mess right now. All I got to go on is bits and pieces. And now I got people after my blood. They don't tell you about the real shit when you sign on for this job. They let you find out for yourself."

"Ain't that the truth. I called you a cab. Lord knows you don't need to be walkin' around out there. We don't want those boys tryna' finish what dey started."

"Thanks a lot, man," I looked outside to see a Yellow Cab pull up. I downed the

rest of my brew and rose gingerly. "Hey, you just helped me out when a lot of people wouldn't. What's your name?"

"My name's Terrence, but my friend's call me T."

"Thanks again, T. My name is Detective Greg Sharp, but since I count you as a friend, just call me whatever you feel like. And I'll be back in here tomorrow. I think I found a new favorite drinking hole."

"Aight then, G-Money. Come by around 8:30 if you can. My niece comes in here to sing. You ain't never laid eyes on a girl prettier than Michelle Lane."

"Will do, T. Be safe, bro."

He patted his .357, giving me another "I've been around the block" smile.

"You know I will, Lil' G. You betta believe it."

I eased myself into the taxi. "Hollowell Parkway, please."

"You got it, mon," the Rastafarian behind the wheel cranked up the stereo, blaring Jamaican rap. I smelled the distinct odor of pot and saw that he had a fat el hanging out of his mouth. I smiled, thinking of all the things I'd seen tonight that reminded me that I was a young criminal kid at heart. Had I changed at all? I knew that there was so much more to come. It felt like Reilly was out for my ass. One day, and I was already the target of a gang hit? That didn't sit right with me.

We stopped next to my rocket, and I flipped a few bills out of my wallet to the Rasta man.

"Stay smokin' bro," I said as I climbed out of the cab.

"You know I ain' no rudeboy! I smoke that *IIIRIEE* gangsta shit, mon."

I let myself laugh. An uncommon sight, and totally unexpected tonight thanks to the earlier fiasco. I climbed onto my bike and sped towards my apartment. Some hard-won rest was due to me.

The next morning Hank had some welcome information to share with me.

"Aight bruh, these dead dudes were all high ranking soldiers in the Vice Lords."

"Alright, but how does that connect them to the buildings? It's obvious that someone wanted these men dead because of their company. The building codes showed that none of them were scheduled for retrofitting."

"Where were they at?" Hank asked.

"Blocks apart. No apparent connection was found with any of the buildings' construction companies, insurance, or former owners. They were just old abandoned buildings where crackheads and gangbangers hang out."

"Well damn, boy, there's yo connection! This some gangsta shit goin on. An' if these boys had these pendants and actual jobs, then they was killed for one reason; somethin' big's goin' down with dat shipping company."

Finally, something I could go on. I flipped through the file Hank had handed me and stopped on a picture of a well-dressed white man with long dreaded hair. It was a surveillance photo, impeccably clear. Hank didn't like to fuck around when it came to recon.

"Is this Steele? Looks crazy." He was wearing a nice suit, with a silver pendant showing clearly on his breast. I scratched behind my left ear absently, a tic that surfaced every time I was deep in thought.

"Yeah, he a regular gangsta badass, or at least he talks a big game. He grew up in Decatur, sellin' hard and joinin' Vickie Lou when he was on'y bout twelve year's old."

"And where is he now?"

"Hiding. Wouldn't you if ya boys got clapped?" Hank gave me his smart-ass over-the-glasses look.

"True. Where's his usual spot?"

"Downtown on Peachtree Industrial. A nice place called Giorgio's. He's tied in with the owner, so my bet is he's lettin' Steele lay low there."

"Alright thanks, Hank. Say hi to the ol' lady and the kids." I stepped from the shop with renewed energy, setting my glare down the busy street. I'd find this out if it killed me. Who knows—it may yet.

I had some errands that needed tending to. I stopped at my office long enough to brief Ava and then have her debrief me.

That done, I rode up to Drake, Moore, Wallace and Steele to question co-workers of the prominent gangsters. None of them knew much about their bosses. They ran the company from their cloistered office, which only a select few people ever entered.

I flashed my badge at the secretary as she made a move as if to deter me from entering their office.

"I'd like to have a look inside their office, please."

"I'm afraid Mr. Steele has given me strict orders not to let anyone into his office without his presence."

"Well, since it is also the office of the three men who were brutally murdered this month, I don't really give a damn what Mr. Steele has to say about it."

"I'm afraid you're wrong, *sir*." She almost spat the last word at me. "Mr. Steele and his associates entered into a contract that on the event of any of their deaths, their

property would be automatically transferred to the surviving partners. So you see, everything in that room is now Mr. Steele's property, so he has no reason to allow you to look around." She looked at me scornfully.

"Well if you see Mr. Steele, tell him to give me a call," I put my card down on the desk. "I think I'd like to have a few words with him."

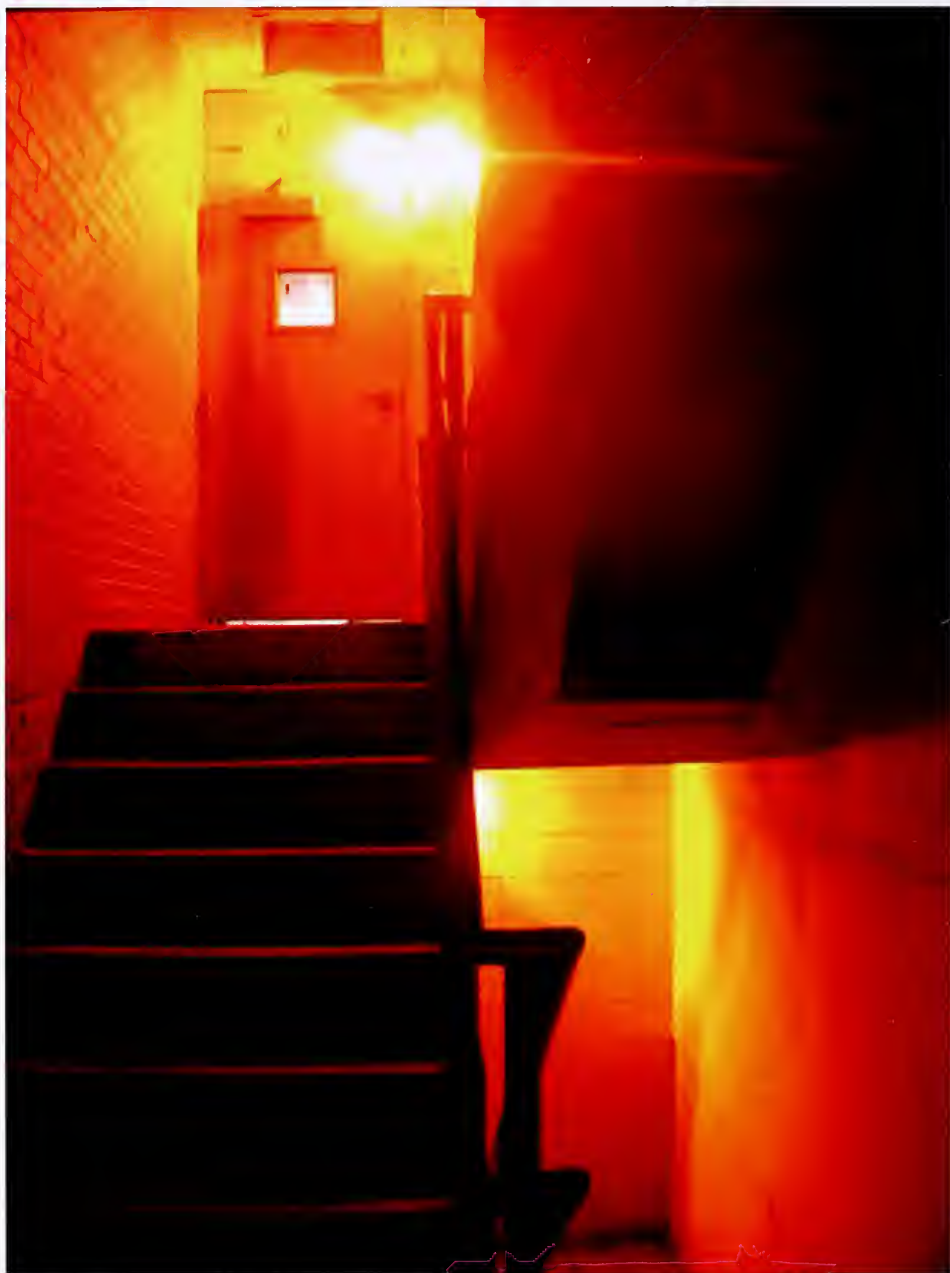
"Don't hold your breath," she sniffed absently. "Mr. Steele doesn't like police, as a general rule."

"What a surprise." I left her to be contented with her smugness. Outside, I pulled out my flask and drank to the sun. I lit a Red and began walking around to the truck pit where the freighters were parked until they were ready for a job. I looked around for drivers or other personnel, and, seeing none, I strolled casually over to the trucks. Opening the back door of one slightly, I peered inside, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness. Empty. I looked up on the wall and saw the shipping destination clipboard, upon which had been written shipping codes. I stared at it for a second. Why would an empty truck have shipping codes posted? I checked the date. It was scheduled to depart from Memphis at 5:00 P.M. today. I looked at my watch—5:45 Eastern. That would make it 4:45 in Tennessee. Something illegal was being shipped in these trucks, and the company was trying to make it untraceable. The list read, TN 140 350, NC 137 400, and so on.

I took my notebook out and jotted a few of the codes down, then closed the door. Taking a long drag from my cigarette, I rubbed sleepiness from my eyes. My side and leg still hurt from the other night, but at least I was alive and moving.

I walked around the corner back to my bike and sat strattling the seat, thinking of my next move. I went over it in my mind:

*I stopped at my office long
enough to brief Ava and
then have her
debrief me*



Lindsey Driscoll, *Hesitation*, photography

Vice Lords were rivals with the Black Gangster Disciples, two rival gangs known for as much separatist violence as the Crips and Bloods. Three owners of a shipping company killed, with one left to rake in the chips. And strange shipping codes before the trucks even had shipments. Where did it add up? What was the company involved in? And how do the murders factor in? I felt the pangs of hunger gnawing at me.

As the sun settled across the western sky, I rode to the nearest McDonald's, grabbed enough food to keep the gears turning, and headed towards Vortex. T had said this Michelle Lane was too good to be true, so I decided to take him up on his offer from the previous night.

I arrived at Vortex at 8:45, after stopping off at my apartment to shower and shave. I needed a little relaxation, and maybe a night out would clear my head enough to think this whole thing through. And it was a night to look good. With the stubble gone and a nice black suit, I like to think I clean up pretty nice. I pushed the stained door of the venue open and crossed the threshold. At that very second, I heard the most beautiful voice singing about a cold, windy night in Chicago. My gaze followed my ears and I turned to the stage erected at the far end of the tables. The woman standing there was a gorgeous Filipino, with eyes so dark and deep I felt drunk just looking into them. Her hair was medium length, cut so it framed her face with black satin curtains. She belted out a high note just then and that was it. That was a face a man could get used to waking up to every morning.

I lit a cigarette as her song ended and, in need of a strong whiskey, walked over to the bar. T was there serving a few fashionable young couples. Probably a bunch of college kids on a date night or

I felt old in the sense that age is measured by the things you've seen and done

something. If they only knew what kind of depravities people commit beyond the scope of their surroundings, they wouldn't be so carefree. I was only 29, but I felt old in the sense that age is measured by the things you've seen and done. My mind was heavy and I gesture to T.

He smiled big as he finished with the college students and walked my way.

"Glad to see you up and walkin' round. What's your poison?"

"Black label, please. Make it a double." I winked cockily at him.

"Drinkin' man—what I like to hear." He poured the whiskey into a double glass and went to the ice chest.

"Oh, that won't be necessary, friend," I called out. "Ruins the taste."

He grinned again, handing me the glass.

"So. What you think, son?" he asked, looking square at me.

"It's good, but I'm no stranger to whiskey. It all tastes the same to me now," I laughed.

"Naw, man, what did you think about *her*?" he nodded towards the stage, where Michelle was midway through her second number. I looked her way and met her eyes again, and the corners of her mouth turned up ever so slightly.

"Oh. You were right, T," I said. "She's gorgeous, too much for words."

He got a hoot out of that. "Heh-heh-heh, I told you, my man. She's the best singer in Georgia, no contest. She's been livin' here since she was about six years old. She an' her folks moved in from the Philippines to the Grady projects, where

I used to stay befo' I got this place. I known her since she was a little thing, and now she comes to sing for her ol' Uncle T about once or twice a week."

"Sweet kid. What's she do now?"

"She works for Drake, Moore, Wallace and Steele."

I almost choked on the whiskey.

"What? Who's her boss?"

"Mr. Steele. She's one of his aides. Why?"

"Because I'm investigating the murders of Mr. Steele's partners."

T stared at me, momentarily milling this information around.

"Michelle doesn't know much about Mr. Steele's personal life. She tell me bout 'im sometimes, how she think he a crook, so I know he ain't getting' his dirty hands on baby girl. She's incorruptible! Should be, too, the way I taught her. Don't need to be messin' around in that dishonest business as long as you can make a living with your *hands*." He held his out to me, showing me the calluses on them. My father had hands like those.

"Words to live by, sir." I raised my glass to him.

He scoffed. "Easy wit' that 'sir' shit, boy. You know I'm still a young stud."

"More like an old ass mare!" We laughed. It felt good to unwind a bit, but I was focused on Michelle. If she was mixed up in any of this, she might be in danger. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I feel things before they happen, a strange intuition. Maybe it's just paranoia, but they usually turn out to be right.

Michelle finished singing, smiled dazzlingly at the crowd and stepped down off of the stage. The bar was considerably busier tonight, and it was a small wonder why. If I had known about this hidden gem earlier, I'm sure I'd be a regular among the crowd of her admirers.

She crossed the floor, smiling and thanking people pelting her with compliments. She was dressed in a long, slinky dress that clung to her like a second skin, the glittery fabric flashing as she walked out of the glare of the houselights and into the softer light of the bar area. She approached Terrence and I with yet another sparkling grin.

"Uncle Terrence, I *love* coming here! It's such a self esteem boost!" She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. As she came back over the bar, her eyes turned to mine again.

"Who's your friend, Unc?" She smiled again.

"My name is Greg Burke. Your uncle helped me out last night, and invited me to come see you sing tonight. I've got to say I'm glad I accepted."

She brightened, if that were possible. "Aren't you the charmer! Well my name is Michelle Lane. But you mean to tell me you're the same man Uncle T helped out last night? That means you were shot!" Her face showed genuine concern.

"Yeah, that would be me. I'm a little sore, but nothing T's 'prescription' can't help." I grinned, raising the glass.

"Liquor is Uncle T's solution for everything!" She sat down on the stool next to me, crossing her legs and turning towards me. She looked at me as though she were sizing me up. That's something I knew I had in common with this girl. If she had grown up in the Grady project, then she knew as well as I to get a good look at whoever you meet.

"So what is your line of work, Greg?" She took a sip of the Long Island iced tea that Terrence had just set down.

"I'm a police detective. I'm actually investigating a case that may have something to do with your boss, Mr. Steele."

"Imagine the odds! It seems we were

bound to meet in some way or another, Greg.” She smiled again, that smile that makes you lose your train of thought if you’re not careful.

“Cheers to that.”

Hank walked to the end of the bar to serve another group of college couples, leaving me with Michelle. I took sip of my drink and met her eyes again.

“Michelle, I wish I didn’t have to bring it up after just meeting you, but I’d like to talk to you sometime about your boss, Alexis Steele. Would you like to have lunch tomorrow so it doesn’t seem so much like an interrogation?”

She brushed a rogue strand of hair that was hiding part of her face and smiled up at me. “I’d like that.”

“Thank you, Miss Lane.”

“Call me Michelle. Unless you turn out to be my Superman.” Another shining smile.

This banter eventually became actual conversation. We strayed away from the subject of the murders, though. Hardly appropriate cocktail conversation. This went on until nearly everyone had gone, and we were the last two people at the bar.

“My gosh, is it already twelve? I had better get on home.” She looked from the clock back to me and pulled a napkin towards her across the bar. She reached into her purse and pulled out a pen.

“Here’s my number. Call me in the morning.”

“Will do. Good night, Michelle.”

“Good night, Greg. It was a pleasure to meet you.” One final smile before she donned her coat and left.

across an old mugshot. Steele was dressed in the Vice Lord’s red bandana and shirt. The charge he was arrested for was drug distribution. He was caught with another gangster of the BGD’s, one Felipe Giorgio. Bingo.

I looked down at my watch. Time to meet Michelle.

We met at a café in Northside. When she arrived, Michelle looked worried.

“Alexis had been acting strange for a while before he left for Giorgio’s. He wouldn’t talk to anyone except the few mean-looking guys he’d let into his office.” She looked at me, fear outlining her features. “I know he’s been doing drug deals. It’s obvious. But I’m scared that he might come after me.”

“What makes it so obvious?”

“Well,” she took a drink of the iced tea the waiter had brought, “those people he meets with, they’re a bunch of gangbangers. They come in, dressed all in black and blue and they wear bandanas on their heads. You know the type.”

Something moved in the back of my mind, some knowledge I’d heard ages ago. Alexis Steele could be our man.

“Listen, Michelle, I don’t think you should go in to work anymore this week,” I stood up. “I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

“What about lunch?” she asked, hurt.

“It’ll have to wait ‘til another day, sweetheart.” I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “There you go. So you won’t miss me so bad.”

She grinned and pulled me back in, kissing me hard on the lips.

“That’s so you’ll miss me even more.” She said, winking.

I pulled up to Giorgio’s restaurant and cut off the engine. I walked through the door into a dimly lit dining area. The man waiting to seat customers walked up to me.

The next day, I entered Steele’s information into the criminal database. What came back was not surprising. Theft, destruction of property, robbery, weapons violations, and gang-related violence. I came

"Right this way, sir."

He directed me to a table in the far corner of the dining room. Perfect. That way I could see everything around me.

"Is Mr. Giorgio here tonight? I'd like to speak with him." I let my badge drop onto the table. "It's...kinda important."

The usher squirmed slightly. "I will go find him presently, sir." He about-faced smartly and walked off.

I looked around the room. Businessmen and the like, with their trophy wives and model girlfriends. Rich crooks and their cronies. Giorgio's attracted a diverse crowd of rich bastards.

The usher came back. "Mr. Giorgio would like to inform you that if you wish to accept, he would be more than happy to have you dine with him in his office so that you may talk more comfortably."

I followed him to a back hallway where he opened a set of double doors. Giorgio was sitting behind his desk, hands calmly clasped in front of him. He was known for harboring people with certain needs, but never got his hands dirty in their business. He was squeaky clean, but I knew there were certain things I could say to find Alexis.

"Good evening, officer." He gave me a well-practiced pseudo-smile. "Please have a seat." He gestured at the armchair across from him.

"My cooks have prepared a few things for me and my guest, but I doubt we will sample them all. You may have your choice of whatever meal you'd like."

"Thanks, but I just had lunch with a friend. I'd like to talk to you about your guest, a Mr. Alexis Steele."

He showed no signs of discomfort at the mention of his name. I had obviously not been the first cop to come in here and request a client's name.

"I'm afraid I can't help you. Mr. Steele

and I are friends and fellow businessmen. Even if I knew something of worth to you, I would quite possibly just keep that to myself." He eyed me with a look that married contempt with innocence. It was an ugly, unnatural look.

"How'd you like it if we talked about it downtown then?" I thought the old standby police response to an uncooperative person might do the trick.

But Giorgio was good. "We both know that you don't have the power to bring me downtown anywhere, as I haven't been accused of any crimes. Please don't insult my hospitality, Mr...?"

"Burke. *Detective* Greg Burke. You know, the guy your gang sent some triggermen to drop a couple nights ago?"

This struck a nerve. "Now you listen to me," he said, with obvious anger, "I put that behind me. If you think you can come here and involve me with gang violence, think again."

"I don't care how clean you keep yourself. Steele got wind of an investigation into the murders he committed. You and I both know that he asked you to take care of it, and knowing you two are such good friends, you would have no problem sending a few foot soldiers my way."

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about. Please, leave." He got up, waving his hand towards the door. As I rose, I glanced on the wall at a picture mounted. Giorgio and Steele, standing in front of a big 18-wheeler with Steele's new company name, Steele Shipping Enterprises.

"Celebrating a new business partnership, huh?" I smirked at him as I walked to the door. "Don't get too comfortable. By January, you might be living in a cell smaller than this room."

My head ached as I looked over all

the information I had gathered. It still didn't give me any clue as to where Steele might be hiding. I circled the three buildings on a large city map, trying to find a connection. The best conclusion I could find was that they created an almost perfect triangle, approximately two miles on each side. The ringing telephone on my bedside table broke my concentration.

"Burke?" Ava's voice, tinged with fearful tears. "Reilly's dead. They found him at 103 Pinecrest. Same M.O. as the last three." She choked back a sob. "They left a note. 'I got that Asian bitch now, gonna make her a nice little star.'"

My heart raced. "Ava, get to a friend's house. Take a few different cabs, have the last one drop you off and circle the block a few times. If he knows it's me and who I know, they might come after you."

I put the phone back on the charger. On the map, 103 Pinecrest was in the same general area as the other buildings. I circled it and measured again. It was equidistant like all the others. And that note: 'gonna make her a nice little star'—

I measured again, hoping my hunch would be right. I circled another building, the one that was listed at 1464 Elm Street. A perfect 5-point star, the symbol of Steele's gang.

I had barely made the connection, it seemed, before I was on my motorcycle, speeding towards Elm Street. It was 5:32 P.M. If Steele was this involved in gang symbolism, he'd probably wait just until 5:55 to kill her. I didn't have much time. I opened up the throttle, buildings and cars a blur around me.

I got to 1464 Elm. It was a rundown four-story, the kind some squatters would inhabit. I ran up the stoop and eased the door open.

Inside, it was darkish, and the only sound came from my pounding heart. I

cleared all of the rooms on the first, second, and third floors quickly, checking my watch again. 5:51. I had to find her. I started up the last set of stairs and heard muffled talking. I burst through a door on my left and into the crime scene.

Michelle was tied up on the ground, gagged, with tears streaming from her eyes. Steele was bent over her, grinning maniacally, brandishing a straight razor inches from her face.

"FREEZE!" I shouted in the commanding voice they taught us in basic.

Alexis whirled around, his face contorted in rage. "Fuck you, cop!"

He strafed to the side with remarkable agility and began to draw a gun tucked in the back of his pants. My Desert Eagle barked at him. For all of his gangster swagger, he flinched violently as the bullet whistled above his head. He bolted through the window at the far end and onto the fire escape as I ran to Michelle. I took the gag from her mouth, kissed her once and slashed the ropes with my buck knife.

"Call this number, tell Ava that Greg said to mobilize some units on Elm Street and surrounding avenues. Tell her I found Steele." And without another word, I followed Steele's exit.

Looking down, it was clear that he didn't try to escape by the street. He must have gone to the roof instead. I scaled the final steps to the top of the building, easing my eyes over the edge. Two shots rang out and the bullets ricocheted off the concrete of the rooftop ledge. I saw Steele as he leapt for the three-story next door. I sprinted across my building and followed his lead, rolling as I landed to reduce shock. It was your typical movie scene, chasing this asshole across three buildings. I got bored after the second and pissed nearing the end of the third, so I took aim and clipped the bastard in the leg. That sent him toppling

*Damn, could it get any
more like a
cheap B-movie?*

over the edge of the roof of a small two-story business into the small alley, where a pile of trash was waiting as a cushion. Damn, could it get any more like a cheap B-movie?

I scurried down the fire escape of this building into the alley, pointing my gun at Steele's head.

"End of the line, buddy." I winked at him. "How's it feel?"

Back at the station, Steele was breaking down left and right. He had gone over the edge, figuratively and, I thought with a grin, literally. He was broken in body and mind, spilling his guts to whomever would listen.

"Me and Giorgio planned everything—everything man. My trucks was runnin' drugs to different buyers all over the Southeast. He wanted a piece of it, an' I wanted mo' money. So we started knockin' off my partners. My *brothers*. If they knew I was fuckin' around with a BGD, my Lords would kill me. So I did it, man, I did it all. I want solitary, though, an' a reduced sentence for bringin' y'all Giorgio, and wi'ness protection when I get out, an'..."

I stopped paying attention. He gave me everything I wanted to hear.

Michelle was waiting for me in the lobby. She looked shook up, but still as beautiful as ever. She was finished with her statements and ready to go back to normalcy.

"Since I flaked on lunch, how about dinner, babe?" I grinned, hoping for the best.

She smiled wide. "I'd like that."



Alex Grimes, *Biomorph/Energy*, ink

ERIC **ROBERT** RUDOLPH

by Leah Hermes



This part happens before the bomb.

Dad drives Mom to work and I ride in the backseat. At first, I enjoy watching the people crowd around the building, until I see they wield pictures of dead babies that look like aliens covered in red paint. They thrust Bibles at the car windows as Mom gets out. One of the crowd, Anthony, chit-chats with Mom, and while telling her she and her little bitch of a daughter and son-of-a-whore husband will rot in Hell, he eyes the slight curves under the silk of her pink blouse.

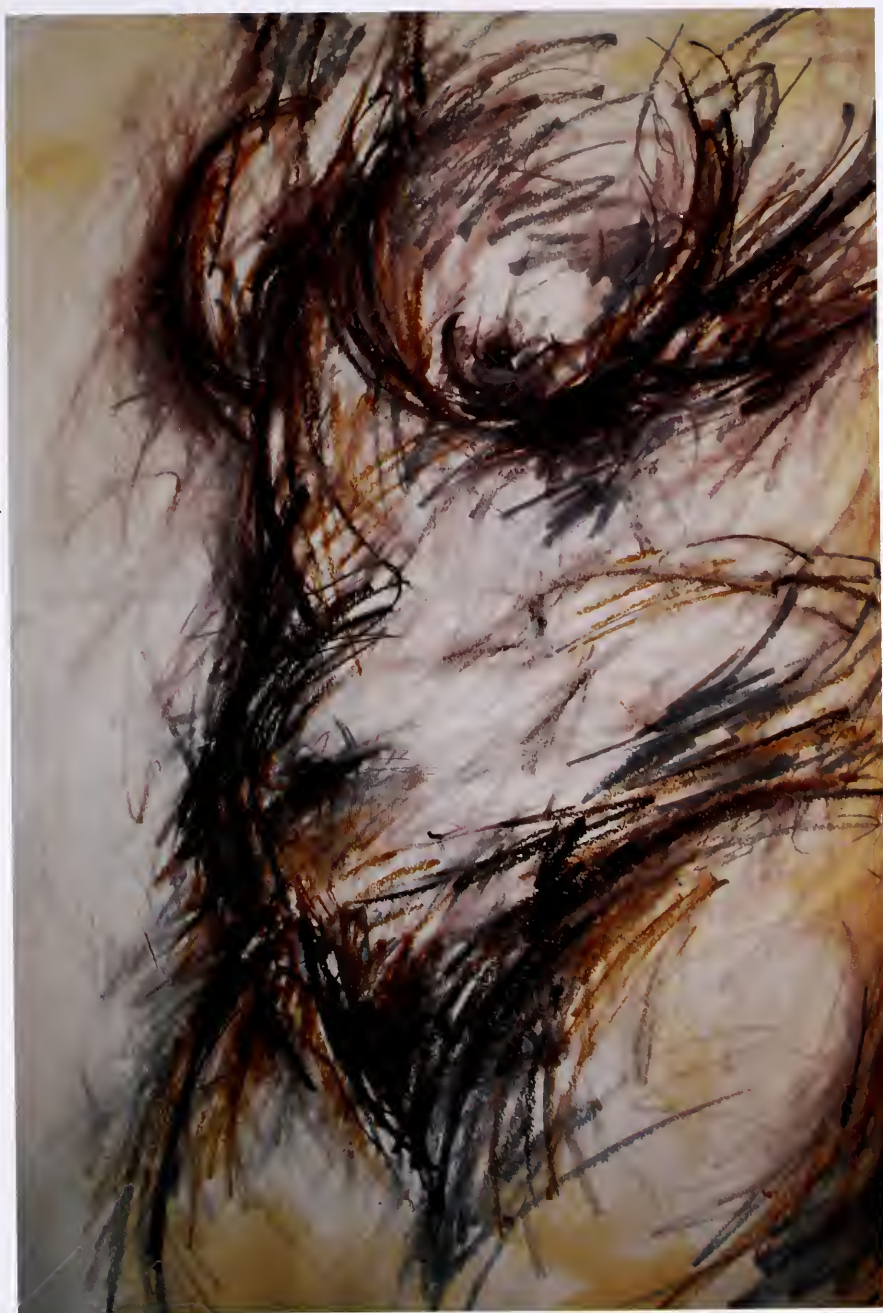
That year, Mom won't let me go to the mailbox because she thinks Anthony's going to send anthrax. He never does because he claims he's not "that kind of person," but he still calls the house every week when he knows we're not home and leaves messages on our answering machine. "I hope someone kills you just like you kill those babies." After that, Mom tells me not to answer the phone either.

January 29, 1998. That morning, I pull on purple nylon windbreakers but decide at the last moment I want to wear jeans. We leave two minutes late. Mom sits in the car three blocks away when the security guard at the clinic, Robert Sanderson, realizes the cactus is out of place and picks it up, triggering the dynamite. Rusted nails become shrapnel. The cactus explodes, its spines popping, wheeling through windows. Glass splinters, soars onto the pavement outside. Bricks topple and the ceiling spills to the floor below. A nurse, Emily Lyons, collects holes in her skin the size of fists. Mom hears the boom and says it sounds like thunder, except everyone screams. She doesn't remember the sirens.

Four months later, May of '98, the pictures in the newspaper depict a chubby man with dark, unkempt hair and two eyebrows. I pictured him as a unibrow sort of person, the kind of guy who murders to stop murders, with a scruffy beard and beady, black eyeballs. Instead, he is clean-shaven and I detect a hint of a smile. He looks pretty normal to me.



Katelyn Hancock, *Roadkill #1*, conte and charcoal



Katelyn Hancock, *Untitled*, conte and charcoal



Rebecca Renfroe, *Dogs See in Black and White*, photography

AWAKE WITH A STRANGE LIGHT

by Justin Fargason

Riding through the Czech countryside
when you look closer the forest remains
lit to a distance of foreign symmetry
amidst a tourist world of plastic saints,
graffiti, and inevitable progress and hope.



Editor's Note

Quad, this modest tome you hold, exists to showcase some of the most inspired work in literature and the visual arts that the students of Birmingham-Southern have to offer. As editor, it has been my pleasure to take part in this conversation, and with my fingers on the pulse of BSC's creative circles, I am happy to report that they are alive and well. The latest testament to that rests in your hands now. You should feel good about that.

Working on the 2009 edition of *Quad*—reading through submissions, struggling to pick only a few highlights in a pile of gems, hunting down elusive artists, and suffering from mild eye-strain in front of the temperamental dinosaur that is the *Quad* layout computer—has shown me that the literary arts community is something we shouldn't take for granted. Nor is it a passing curiosity. This experience took my sub-editors and me to the place where what we're paying big bucks to study meets what we love to do, which is no small thing. I hope all students someday reach this point. Otherwise, your priceless liberal arts education will have missed its mark.

This year's *Quad* would not have been possible without the help of my wonderful staff. I first thank Charlotte for her multiple trips through some of the longest prose pieces *Quad* has seen and for her critical yet appreciative eye. Carleson received a slew of poetry submissions but was still able to remember word for word some of his favorite lines. His enthusiasm for poetry and his own gift as a poet were good to have on my side. In the art realm, Annie chased down stubborn and talented artists with a camera in her hand, pushing them to submit, assuring them that it was good thing to do. She's to thank for this year's superb art selections. Also, I thank them all for putting up with my sometimes obsessive behavior, my snarky emails and deadlines. Serving on *Quad* was a new experience to each of us, and it was fun feeling our way through it together. I enjoyed being the late-night glow coming from the Publication Room.

I also want to thank those forces outside the *Quad* office for their support and guidance. I am grateful for faculty advisor Dr. Donahue as well as for the SGA and BSC Publications Board, who put up with my whining about the *Quad* computer and kept me plugged in to the student body.

Finally, endless thanks to all of you brave and talented students who sent us your stuff. It's not easy to do, and we all appreciate it. This couldn't have happened without you.

I hope this year's edition finds its place alongside *Quad*'s rich history. Keep submitting!

Policy

Quad, the literary magazine of Birmingham-Southern College, was founded in 1940 and is published annually. The editors encourage undergraduate submissions, and those from faculty and alumni, which are reviewed anonymously by *Quad* staff members. *Quad* is funded by the Student Government Association. Submissions policies are subject to change from year to year. The views expressed in *Quad* are those of the artists and authors and are not necessarily those of the staff, faculty advisor, Publications Board, SGA, or the administration of Birmingham-Southern College. Copyright 2009 by *Quad* editors and Birmingham-Southern College.

Colophon

This edition was created on a Hewlett Packard computer. Adobe Pagemaker 7.0 and Adobe Photoshop 7.0 were used in computer layout. Times New Roman, Arial Black, Arial Baltic, and Book Antiqua fonts in point sizes ranging from 9 point to 48 point were used. Printing was done by Commercial Printing Company of Birmingham, Alabama; approximately 500 copies of 96 pages plus cover. All typesetting and layout were done by the *Quad* staff.

